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"I CALL ON EVERY MAN AMONG YOU TO TAKE MY SIDE AGAINST THAT RASCAL DAN DUNCAN!"

Silver Sam, THE SHASTA SPORT; OR, Dan Duncan's Desperate Device.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS,
AUTHOR OF "THE HAYSEED DETECTIVE,"
"THE RACE-COURSE DETECTIVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I. AN AWFUL RIDE.

"Git up!"

Cr-r-r-ack! sounded the long whip, and the leaders of the stage coach that was flying through a California valley jumped forward, so that the lumbering vehicle, with a groan that was almost human, swung to one side in an alarming manner—to at least one passenger on the roof.

It was noon, and the sun shone down through the clear air upon one of the most beautiful scenes that could be witnessed in that most beautiful of all American States, California.

Old Bill Long, who was handling the ribbons, had his four horses well in hand, and it was to be supposed that the coach would reach Bull Canyon on time, judging by the grin of satisfaction that overspread his weatherbeaten countenance as he saw how his horses responded to his admonitions.

"What time shall we make the end of the trip?" asked the man who sat at his right, and the old coachman hardly deigned to look at him as he answered, gruffly:

"Thet all depends on whether we break down afore we git thar."

"Good gracious! You don't suppose we shall break down, do you?"

The speaker was a young man of light complexion, who wore spectacles, and who was holding to his seat as if he expected the coach to run away from him unless he clung tightly to the railing. He had a fresh complexion, and old Bill Long had set him down as a "cussed tenderfoot" as soon as he noticed him climbing to his seat on the coach in Sacramento.

The young man was in an ordinary business suit, of light material, and he had a white tie, such as is worn by clergymen, around his stand-up collar. His whole appearance, neat and dapper to a degree, presented a marked contrast to the careless attire of the bronzed man who was holding his four horses to a straight line along a narrow valley plentifully strewn with boulders.

Bill Long did not answer the anxious query of the young man, for he was too busy with his horses. Moreover, he knew that there was what he called an "almighty nasty bit o' road" coming, and he could not say exactly what would be the consequences.

There was only one other "outsider," and he sat behind, by the side of the guard, taking little notice of anything. With a cigar between his teeth he puffed away unconcernedly, not condescending to hold his seat when a jar shook the vehicle, as it did at intervals, when the wheels hit a big stone, and was dragged over it to the level again by the sheer strength of the powerful and active team.

The guard, a dapper young fellow, in a rough coat of the sack pattern, with a flannel shirt showing beneath it, open at the neck and laced down the front with a blue cord that gave it a dashing appearance, in accord with the broad-rimmed soft hat that shaded his face, looked at his taciturn companion from time to time, but did not venture to address him after his first remark, as they mounted at Sacramento, that it was a "fine morning," and to which the stranger had responded only with a grunt.

As the guard and the stranger were swayed backward and forward by the motion of the coach, the butt of a revolver would protrude from under the sack coat of each, in the leather belt that encircled the waist.

For that matter, the coachman was armed, too, and there was a repeating Winchester rifle in its case at the back of the coach, where the guard could seize it at a moment's notice, if necessary.

Road-agents were not unknown in the locality, and there was a strong box of treasure in the "boot" that must be protected, no matter if both guard and driver were wounded to the death.

Now the coach was directed up a gentle ascent that soon brought them five hundred feet above the valley, with its brawling stream.

"Git up, blame yer!" growled the coachman, as he kept his reins well in hand, never taking his eyes off his leaders save to look a little ahead, to see what there was offered in the way of danger or obstacle before them in the almost impracticable road—if road it could be termed. It led by the side of a mountain that rose perpendicularly on the left, while on the right was the awful declivity to the valley.

For miles this road extended, sometimes narrowing so that there was very little space on the right as the vehicle was crowded close to the precipice on the left.

"Suppose we were to get too near to the edge, what would become of us?" asked the fair young man at old Bill's side, as they came to a particularly narrow spot.

Long urged his horses on until he had passed the place and reached a stretch wide enough to be comparatively safe. Then he faced the young man in the spectacles, and growled almost vindictively:

"Ef yer open on me ag'in when I'm tooling this hyar team in sech a place ez thet, I'll paste yer in ther mouth. Onderstand?"

The young man made no retort, but he kept a sharp lookout for bad places, and evidently felt the greatest curiosity as he saw old Long brace himself to hold the coach to the narrow path.

The sun was near the Western horizon when the coach approached the end of this nerve-racking portion of the journey. They were still on the narrow road, and the height had increased to at least a thousand feet, when old Bill saw, with a feeling of satisfaction he was too dignified to betray to his companion, that another mile would bring them to the level plain, with five miles before them to reach the mining town of Bull Canyon, the end of his run.

As is always the case in California, the sun disappeared with a dip when it got to the point of setting, and great shadows were growing across the way as old Bill urged his team to the very highest point of his road, and then sent them flying down the slope with a recklessness characteristic of the Western stage driver.

"Thunder and blazes!"

That was the loud execration of old Long. It meant danger ahead, even if others on the coach had not seen it almost as soon as the driver.

The horses were at full gallop, and, pull as he might, old Bill could not stop them in time to save a catastrophe!

He bore down on the brake, but that scarcely lessened the terrible speed at which the coach was going.

The young man by his side did not betray any excitement, for the simple reason, evidently, that he did not comprehend the danger. But the guard at the back of the coach was now half standing up, and the gruff fellow by his side, gripping his cigar tightly in his teeth, was watching the road ahead intensely, showing how thoroughly he understood what a terrible risk they ran.

Someyards ahead—so near that they could distinguish it plainly—there was a wash-out which extended within four feet of the perpendicular rock, and that must, therefore, throw the coach headlong down the awful chasm unless some miracle intervened.

"Whoa! Whoa! Curse ye'r hides—whoa! Stop I say, or ye'r'll send us all ter—"

Bill Long's thoughts were traveling as fast as his horses, in spite of his yelling, that seemed to be too full of excitement to permit of his thinking about anything.

Like a flash an idea came into his head, and as he realized that brake and reins were powerless to stop the rush down the hill, he determined to put it to the test.

On thundeerd the great coach, and they were almost at the brink of the wash, down which great pieces of rock were even now falling rapidly with a sound that was inexpressibly terrifying in the ears of the stage driver, rough fellow as he was, and reckless as he had always been of danger.

"Who-o-o-op! Gi-i-i-i-it! Who-o-o-o-a-a-a! Gr-r-r!"

With these inarticulate sounds, the driver dexterously turned his team suddenly toward the perpendicular rock; then tightening his grip on the reins, Bill yelled again, and the four horses literally leaped over the gap!

Before any one could think, the coach had heeled half over toward the wall, and the two outer wheels were up in the air as the vehicle passed over the gap, and righted itself with a thump and a plunge off the other side.

CHAPTER II.

MAZA, THE DWARF.

"Whew!" grunted old Bill, as he pulled his horses up to a walk, and rubbed his heated face on a great red handkerchief.

"What's the matter?" was asked, and he turned indignantly to see the fair-haired young man looking inquiringly at him through his spectacles.

Old Bill paused a moment as if to select a vocabulary fit for the occasion, and then, deciding that there was nothing in his profane reserves that could do justice to the occasion and the man's stupidity, he pulled on the reins and sent his horses on again at a smart trot.

What the rough-looking passenger at the back of the coach may have thought about it nobody inquired, for he kept on puffing away at a new cigar, and appeared to be lost in his own reflections as soon as the excitement over the narrow escape of the coach had subsided.

The moon had risen over the giant trees as the coach dashed up to the "hotel" in Bull Canyon.

The usual knot of loungers stood around at the door, all of them bearing the unmistakable stamp of miners—men ready for any emergency in a community where might was the only dictum that was respected.

Bill Long jumped from his seat and hustled into the bar-room, where he was instantly served with the "guzzle" about which he had been thinking for the last few miles of his drive.

The gruff passenger at the back of the coach got down and looked carelessly at the hostler of the hotel as he took out the four tired and hot horses, and sent them trotting to the stable, while the four fresh animals that were to go on to Colfax and back again to Bull Canyon that night were being backed into their places at the coach.

"Who in blazes hev' yer got in thet thar' coach?" asked the gruff man, carelessly of the guard, as he placed his hand on the handle of the door.

The guard, being somewhat nettled at the surliness of the other on the trip, replied, with a shortness hardly consistent with his good-natured expression:

"None o' ye'r blamed business."

A quick movement of the stranger's hand toward his belt, with a momentary flash of his deep-set eyes, warned the guard, and his own hand flew to his pistol.

Then the other laughed with a discordant "Ha! ha!" and throwing up his hands as a proof of his pacific intentions, strolled carelessly upon the veranda, as if he agreed with the guard that the occupant of the coach was, indeed, no business of his.

As he walked away the coach door opened and a woman tripped forth. She was a handsome brunette, of perhaps thirty years of age, with a wealth of raven-black hair crowning her shapely head, and dark eyes that fairly glittered in the moonlight as she glanced hither and thither.

Hardly had she alighted than the rough passenger was on the road again, his hand extended as if to assist the woman.

The look she gave him might have abashed a more sensitive man, but this man only laughed, and was about to seize her by the arm when there was a sudden interruption, and every one looked to see blood spilled.

Somebody caught the stranger by the wrist and swung him around with such force that he tripped over the three steps leading to the veranda, and sprawled at full length upon the floor.

"Cuss yer!" growled the fallen man. "W'ot d'yer mean?"

He sprang to his feet, and would have rushed upon his assailant, but found himself looking into the muzzle of a six-shooter, while the young man with the light complexion and spectacles, who had sat beside the driver on the coach, observed, smilingly:

"We don't insult ladies in the East, usually."

"W'ot's that?"

"I say we don't usually insult ladies in the East, and when a man forgets himself in that way there is always some other man ready to teach him manners."

This was said without any trace of excitement, or even anger, and the smile that played about the young man's mouth was so exasperating that the other fairly writhed in indignation.

"Who are you?" he shouted.

"Silver Sam, of Shasta!"

The answer seemed to swallow up every bit of courage the other may have possessed, for he shrank back, and asked, gaspingly:

"The Shasta Sport?"

Silver Sam nodded.

"Then—I—beg—ye'r pardon!"

He thrust out a big, hard hand, and took the small, white fingers of Silver Sam in a powerful grasp, as the young man passed his pistol to his left hand to meet the other's advances.

It was a curious thing to see these two men, so unlike in appearance and manner, pressing each other's hands in friendship. Silver Sam, as he called himself, might have been a dapper dry-goods clerk or bank clerk, and there was no suggestion of the Westerner in any of his manners or movements, except his appalling quickness in reaching his pistol, which had just been exemplified for the edification of the rough stranger to whom he was speaking.

"My name is Mark Hinckley," announced the stranger, as he released Silver Sam's hand.

"Known all among the Sierras as 'Mug,'" responded Silver Sam, quietly.

Mark started, and his hand involuntarily moved a little toward his belt as he growled:

"Ain't yer mistaken, stranger? Don't yer think yer might hev' took me fer some one else?"

The covert threat in the tone Silver Sam understood perfectly, but, with a light laugh, he turned toward the girl who was standing at the foot of the veranda, calmly listening to the colloquy.

"Glad to see you, Alma. Did you know I was on the coach?" asked Silver Sam.

"Didn't know, and didn't care. You spend so much time in the East now that I never expect to see you out here much."

"Well, don't be offended, Alma. Business takes me to New York often, I know, but I am still faithful to the glorious State I was born in, and where I hope I shall die. I'd sooner see the haze over the Sierras and the tops of the cottonwoods waving in the evening breeze than anything they could show me in the East."

"Except politeness to women," put in Alma, with a smile.

"Ugh!" grunted Hinckley, as he walked into the bar-room.

As the man disappeared, the woman leaned toward Silver Sam and whispered:

"Any news?"

"Not yet."

"But you are on the track? Say that you are, Sam, or I shall go mad. You know how I depend upon you. Since the day my boy was stolen from me two years ago this very night, I have had no peace

night or day, and I feel as if my brain were bursting. You know what a sweet little fellow he was, and to think that he is in the hands of ruffians who may bring him up to be as bad as themselves! Oh, it is horrible, horrible!"

The two were alone on the veranda now. The new horses had been put into the coach, and the stablemen stood at their heads, but every one else was in the bar-room.

There was a world of pity in Silver Sam's blue eyes as he looked at the anguished face of the woman at his side, and he said, softly:

"Look here, Alma Moore—Sam Wallace is going to get to the bottom of this thing and restore your boy to you or there will be a dozen less rascals in California within a month. When that coach was held up in the canyon between here and Sacramento, two years ago—just about the place where we nearly went over the cliff to-day, by the way—and when they shot your husband dead, it was suspected that the Red Bluff gang were in it."

"I know, I know. But, where are they? And who are they?" broke in Alma. "This Red Bluff gang is talked about by every one, but who knows the name of one of them?"

"Keep cool, Alma! We shall find them. I am on a warm trail now," answered Silver Sam, encouragingly.

"And those wretches have my boy—my Aubrey," wailed the woman, wringing her hands.

"Yes, but that need not make you despair. The child is only five years old now, isn't he?"

"Five years, two months and three days," returned Alma, quickly.

"Exactly. Well, he was seen a month ago, as you know, and he is not old enough to be converted into a road-agent or a rascal generally so far."

"They couldn't make him a rascal, no matter how they might try," declared Alma, indignantly. "He is too good, naturally."

"I don't know about that. Rascality is more a question of education and association than natural inclinations. Besides, you said just now you were afraid they might make him as bad as themselves. But, don't worry yourself. You shall have Aubrey before you are much older, and the Red Bluff gang will be brought to their knees at the same time."

Alma Moore looked hopefully into the face of this mild-spoken young man, with his dancing blue eyes, and was about to answer, when, suddenly, she saw a different expression come into them—an expression of fierce determination, mingled with something like hate.

Without a word he dashed around the corner of the house, and threw himself upon something near the ground.

There was a kicking up of dust, a few oaths in guttural tones, then Silver Sam was thrown flat upon his back, while a hideous, thick-set creature, with a large head, in which were set two squinting eyes, made a quick movement to kick the prostrate man in the head.

Before he could do so, however, Silver Sam rolled over and over, out of his way, and sprang to his feet, pistol in hand.

"Maza! The devil incarnate!" cried Sam, as he aimed his pistol straight at the head of the dwarf, hesitated a moment, and then fired.

The report brought all the crowd to the veranda, but Maza had disappeared.

"Curse him! Nothing can hit that fiend!" muttered Sam Wallace, now ashamed of his outburst of temper, and still more of his having failed to hit so easy a mark as Maza's large head within a few feet of his pistol.

"Don't try it, Silver Sam. You are er blamed quick man with er gun, but jist ez good men ez you hev' gone wide when they've tried to bring down that cussed little Greaser. Ther bullet isn't made ez kin give him what he deserves. No, siree!"

It was Mug Hinckley who spoke, and that he meant what he said was evident enough, for superstitious fear showed in every lineament of his face.

"Hinckley is quite right," observed another, who had stood at the side of Silver Sam without being noticed, and calmly entered the conversation as if he had a perfect right to be heard.

He was attired in the neat dress of a professional gambler, with a silk hat on his shiny hair, and with his whiskers trimmed carefully according to the latest mode—a man of perhaps forty, with the marks of a hard life in the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, and a nervous twitching of his hands in their close-fitting kid gloves that betrayed an active temperament held firmly in control.

"Dan Duncan! I didn't see you before. I supposed you were not far away," uttered Silver Sam.

"Of course not. When you saw Maza you knew his master must be in the vicinity. You tried to kill Maza, too. Didn't you?" he added, with a mocking smile.

"The fiend!" muttered Silver Sam.

"Precisely! He is a fiend. That's why I keep him," answered Dan Duncan, coolly. "No one can hurt him, and he is useful to me. How are you, Mrs. Moore? Have you found Aubrey yet?"

The heartless way in which this was said made even Mug Hinckley frown, and he was not the man to be affected by sentiment, either.

As Dan Duncan, the gambler, strolled carelessly into the hotel, and the others, with the exception of Silver Sam and Mug Hinckley, followed him, Alma Moore hissed, through her closed teeth, while her black eyes glittered:

"That man knows where my boy is. I will swear it! by Heaven!"

"I know it!" acquiesced Silver Sam, quietly.

CHAPTER III.

FIGHTING FOR HER BOY.

It was several hours after the events recorded in the last chapter, and the Bull Canyon Hotel was full of life, as it always was at night. The chief industry of the hotel after nightfall was gambling, and the crowd in the large bar-room, with its tables conveniently arranged for different games, was busy making and losing money.

One large table in the center of the room was devoted to faro, and the dealer who was flipping the cards out of the box with the ease and coolness of an expert was none other than Dan Duncan.

It was noticeable that Duncan, in spite of his neat dress and his silk hat, which he wore during the game, had adopted the slangy dialect of the miner, and was equal to any of them in the picturesqueness of his vocabulary. He was amusing himself particularly with a grinning Chinaman who had a great pile of chips before him and who was evidently winning.

"Now, Lo Shun, you pig-tailed stiff! What's eatin' yer? Git out o' thar', with ye'r yellow claws. Pick up ye'r chips, an' right quick, too, or I'll swipe 'em over hyar. What's ther matter with yer? Dreamin' ye'r in Pekin? Drop thet!"

The last two words were uttered with a tremendous yell, and the Chinaman dexterously slipped under the table, as Dan Duncan's long six-shooter made its appearance suddenly, as if by magic, and was pointed straight at the Celestial.

Mark Hinckley, who sat by the side of Lo Shun, lifted the Chinaman into his seat and pretended to make a grab for some of the chips in front of Lo, which brought the heathen to his place quicker than anything.

"Blame ye'r yaller hide! Take ye'r chips off'n that card, will yer?" bawled Mug. "D'yer think I'm a sucker? Play er trick like thet ag'in, interfering with my game, and I'll hang yer up by ye'r cue at ther back ov ther bar. I don't allow no Chink ter git funny with me. Onderstand?"

"Jim, bring some drinks over hyar. I'm er few dollars in, an' I'm goin' ter set 'em up ter celebrate ther occasion. It ain't often I git er chance when Dan Duncan is dealing?"

"What d'yer mean by that?" demanded Duncan, fiercely, pausing in the act of slipping a card from the dealing box. "Do yer mean ter insinuate—"

"Nothin' at all, Dan. Jim, bring on

than thar' drinks. I'll take whisky fer er change."

There was a general laugh at this, as the landlord, a tall, slim fellow, with big whiskers and a taciturn manner, brought the bottle and glasses for the group at the table, which included Silver Sam, sitting quietly at the right hand of Dan Duncan, watching everything, the game included, with the sharpness of a lynx.

The game went on, disturbed only by the passage at arms between the dealer and the Chinaman, as the heathen tried to get the better of the game, and was promptly caught in each trick by Dan Duncan.

It might have been wondered why the Chinaman was allowed to play at all with white men, but the explanation is that in many parts of the West, especially in California, it is considered lucky to have a Chinaman either playing or taking a warm interest in the game. So, although Lo Shun was abused and occasionally kicked by his companions, no one thought of turning him away from the table.

It was close to midnight, and the game had not resulted in any great winning or losing for anybody, when, suddenly, a large head, covered with matted hair, poked itself between Dan Duncan and Silver Sam, and looked into the face of the fair-complexioned young man with a grin of confidence that was most irritating.

Silver Sam, first inclined to seize the hair and give the big head a hearty knock against the corner of the table, restrained himself, and with a half smile, that hid the resentment burning like a volcano in his bosom, he said, quietly:

"Well, Maza!"

"Maladetta! You thought I go, eh?" growled the dwarf, his dark eyes glittering with a greenish light like an angry cat's.

"I didn't care whether you went or not," answered Silver Sam, carelessly, as he put a pile of blue chips upon a certain card, and watched gambler Duncan as he dealt.

"You lie!" came with a vindictiveness in keeping with the dwarf's malicious appearance. "You care so much like never was! You know I can tell you where z'e boy—"

"What?" shouted Sam, turning upon him and seizing the parchment-like throat between his strong white fingers and thumb.

The dwarf tore himself loose, and, hissing something in Silver Sam's ear, disappeared in the mysterious manner peculiar to him, and that suggested his having close connection with the Prince of Darkness himself.

Dan Duncan had continued dealing in his usual apathetic way, while the dwarf and Silver Sam had exchanged their few words, and even when Sam took Maza by the throat there had been no cessation in the steady, supple movement of the gambler's fingers as he dealt the cards.

"Quit thet, yer blamed Chink!" yelled Dan, just as Maza disappeared.

Lo Shun hastily replaced a chip that he had removed from one card of the "lay-out" to another, as he saw that his own card was a loser. He thought the slight diversion caused by Maza's presence had taken Duncan's attention off the game for a moment. But he was badly mistaken.

"Ef I see you touch another of them keards, unless yer hev' a right ter, I'll wring yer head off an' make yer swaller it. You hear me twitter."

As Dan Duncan said this with a careless air, but with a watchful gleam in his eye, there was a scuffle outside.

Then the door of the bar-room, which had been closed to exclude the chilly night air, burst open, and a little boy, comfortably dressed in a suit of blue cloth, and a large white collar spread over his shoulders, rushed in, with terror in his face and a shriek on his lips:

"Oh, don't let him touch me! Don't! Don't!"

Before any one could rise from the table, Maza was at the child's heels, and, seizing him by his golden hair, he pulled the little fellow back and made for the door with the boy in his arms.

"Bang!" rang out Silver Sam's pistol, but, as before, it missed the dwarf, and

Maza, uttering a mocking laugh, dashed through the doorway to the veranda, and was lost in the darkness.

Hardly had he got outside, when Silver Sam reached the veranda, looking vainly for the dwarf.

"Curse him! I must catch him!" he muttered. "It's the first time I've seen the child since he was stolen, and I'm hot on the trail. Ah, what's that?"

With an exclamation of rage and satisfaction combined, he flew upon a living heap in a corner of the veranda, that his instinct told him was Maza and the boy, where doubtless the dwarf thought they would be overlooked in the gloom.

For once Silver Sam's instinct was at fault. It was not Maza and the boy!

"Alma Moore!"

Yes, it was the mother of the boy, and she was lying senseless in the corner, while a bruise on her forehead told that she had been struck there in some way and stunned.

She revived as Silver Sam raised her to a sitting posture, and then evidently a flood of memory came over her, and she sprang to her feet, with her hand to her head.

"Where is he? I saw my boy for an instant. Then Maza threw me down, I struck my head against the veranda, and I remember nothing more."

"Aubrey is somewhere near. We will find him. Keep up your courage, Alma!"

"See! There he is!" she shrieked, as the grinning face of Maza appeared on the veranda in the light that streamed through a window from the hotel.

Silver Sam was about to spring upon him, when the door of the bar-room opened, and Mark Hinckley stood at his side.

"What's ther matter, Sam?" asked Mark, quietly, but gruffly, as usual. "Maza been foolin' with yer?"

For answer, Silver Sam rushed past him to the spot where he had seen the dwarf an instant before.

"Oh, he's gone," observed Mark. "He ran inside, and he an' Dan Duncan is er chinnin' over at ther bar, while ther Chinaman is givin' all ther boys ther laugh at ther faro table, ez he gin'rally does. Thet thar' Chink hez ther devil's own luck."

As Hinckley ran on thus Sam Wallace recovered his equanimity, and passing immediately into the bar-room, saw that Duncan and Maza were in earnest conversation at the end of the bar.

Maza grinned as Alma Moore and Silver Sam entered, and Sam walked over to him.

Silver Sam had hastily outlined a plan to get the child by strategy, but the distracted mother flew at Dan Duncan, and seizing him by the collar, pulled him backward and forward in a tempest of wrath.

"My boy! my boy!" she exclaimed, breathless with passion.

Duncan smiled, and Maza slid quietly around the corner of the bar.

"See hyar, now, Alma!" hissed Duncan, in the miner's dialect. "You know me. I hev' yer boy—yes, I hev', an' I kin keep him, don't you forgit it! No matter what yer friend Silver Sam may do about it."

"You fiend!" groaned Alma Moore.

"Mebbe! Wal, you know ther price of thet boy's liberty, an' p'r'aps his life!"

"As much money as you can demand, rapacious as you may be," interrupted Alma.

"You know I don't want your money," answered the gambler, contemptuously. "Maza will want a thousand dollars in gold, I s'pose. But, as fer me, you know thet it is you I want, an' I mean ter hev' yer, Alma Moore. I'll tell yer now, what yer may not hev' known afore, that I shot down yer husband with my own hand, with one of these pistols—I don't know which one."

He drew two long six-shooters as he spoke and balanced them in his hands in a caressing fashion.

"You know thet I wanted yer afore he ever married yer, an' thet I might hev' had yer, fer you liked me in them days. Wal, he come from ther East, an' he took yer an' married yer. Wal, I put him out o' ther way, and I asked yer again ter marry me."

"And I despised the offer! I hated you, as I do now, Daniel Duncan," interposed Alma, fiercely.

"Wal, thet don't cut no ice. I was determined ez you should hev' me, an' I got some one ter take yer boy away, and I've kept him ever since that day, two years ago. You get him when ther parson hez pronounced us man an' wife, but not afore, so long ez I live."

"And if you were dead?"

"Wal, I've given orders to Maza to give the boy up to you as soon as he is satisfied that I am really dead, and you are to give him a thousand dollars," answered Duncan, carelessly. "Good-night! I'm going to bed. You go and take a sleep, too, and in the morning tell me whether we shall run over to Sacramento and be married or not."

With a half-stifled cry the woman sprang at him, as he turned to leave the room, and tore the two pistols from his grasp. She pointed one at his head, and pulled the trigger. There was a report, but the bullet whizzed past his ear and buried itself in the small mirror at the back of the bar.

"Look out! She's crazy!" shouted Duncan, as he tried to seize her wrists.

She slipped from him, and, bounding back, stepped upon a chair, and thence upon the table, in the midst of the cards, the chips, and the Chinaman's money, while the miners drew their pistols from mere force of habit.

Throwing the pistol in her right hand at Duncan's head, which it just missed, she waved the other weapon in her left, and shouted, as she saw all the men closing around her:

"Stand back! I am a mother fighting for her child, and I call on every man among you to take my side against that assassin and villain, Dan Duncan!"

CHAPTER IV.

HOW MAZA WAS FOOLED.

The dwarf had not been idle. With the devilish malignity of his nature, he had enjoyed the grief and horror of the woman, and had stayed longer than was quite consistent with the caution characteristic of the repulsive creature; but at that interesting crisis he stole out of the hotel by the back way, and hid himself hastily in a bunch of shrubbery that looked like part of the ground itself in the deep shadow.

"Ah, my leetle boy! You all right now, eh?" he whispered, as he seized Aubrey by the shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

The boy had been tied hand and foot with a long red scarf, one end of it having been fastened across his mouth, so that he could not scream, even if he had not been too frightened to try.

"Now, Aubrey, my pretty leetle boy, you know me, eh?"

He had untied the child, and drawn the end of the scarf out of his mouth.

"Yes," answered the boy, in a low voice, trembling with terror.

"Well, you do as I tell you, and you not be hurt. But if you cry out one leetle bit I kill you wiz this. See?"

He drew a long, narrow knife, with an edge that undulated so that it seemed to writhe like a serpent as the dwarf waved it in the dim light that came from one of the windows of the hotel.

"Don't hurt me, and I will do as you tell me."

"You better."

The dwarf, knowing that the child would not make any outcry now, slipped away to the stable a few yards from the back of the hotel.

"Ah, my beauties, I love you! You help! Maza many times, an' you do it again!"

He was apostrophizing two handsome horses that stood at the end of the long stable, tied to a manger. One of them was a black stallion, that threw up his head with a sound of recognition as the dwarf spoke, and the other was a brown thoroughbred mare, who looked at him in the dim light from a single oil lamp with an intelligence that seems to reach its greatest development in a really good horse.

The stableman was moving about the place, but merely glanced at Maza, for the

dwarf was a privileged person around the Bull Canyon Hotel, and the employes had orders to let him alone, and allow him to do as he pleased.

"Hafe they been fed?" asked Maza, shortly.

"Wal, I should say," answered the stableman. "You know horses don't starve aroun' this hyar stable."

Maza did not answer. He hastily threw a saddle upon the back of each horse, tightening the girths and adjusting the stirrup leathers with the dexterity of one who understood the work. Then he looked approvingly at them as he saw that each was equipped with a lariat at the saddle-bow, while a cruel, flexible whip of the fashion known as a "quirt," was fastened to the stirrup leather, ready to be taken off when the rider should mount.

Maza led the two animals into the dark space between the stable and the hotel, and smiled grimly as he saw the child huddled against the stable wall waiting for him.

The noise that had come faintly to his ears from the bar-room when Alma Moore had made her appeal had ceased; and although the lights still blazed, nothing could be distinguished of the uproar within.

"Maladetta! What Duncan doing? He talk-talk too much!" muttered the dwarf, listening, but hearing nothing distinctly.

"Maza!" whispered the boy, "are we going away?"

"Nefer mind. I tell you to-morrow."

"But is mamma going with us if we go? She wants to go."

The dwarf chuckled as he answered: "Ef you good leetle boy, maybe mamma will go."

At this moment the man in the tall hat and neat clothes stole quietly around the corner of the hotel and moved toward the two. No word was spoken, but the dwarf at once brought the stallion forward for his master to mount.

He did mount immediately, and then took the child from the hands of the dwarf and placed him on his front.

The dwarf, leaping into the saddle of the other animal, simply asked:

"We go to ze crib in ze Sierras, eh?"

"Yes."

Both cantered off to the left, keeping out of sight of the front of the hotel, the hoofs of the horses making scarcely any sound on the soft earth that covered the way they pursued.

The man who sat holding the boy said nothing as mile after mile was covered. The child had fallen asleep, and the rider had drawn him closer, so that he lay easily in his arms, and was happily unconscious of anything that might be going on.

Not until just before the dawn did they reach the mountains toward which they had been journeying. The foothills of the Sierras had been traversed, and they entered a canyon that deepened the thick darkness of the darkest part of the night.

"I z'ink z'e boys are z'ere," muttered Maza. "But z'ey show too much light."

His companion did not answer. He was looking forward to a certain spot where a faint red glow was reflected from a rock high above their heads, and insensibly he quickened the pace of his stallion.

"You tell z'em z'at is bad, eh?" queried the dwarf.

The answer was a grunt, which the other understood to be a word of acquiescence.

They rode in the silence and deep darkness for ten minutes or more; then the dwarf again spoke:

"They've taken in z'e light. Maladetta! Z'e fools! It would be too late now if we was anybody else, eh?"

"Hi! Look at z'at!" he exclaimed, suddenly, as a flash of light burst out of the almost utter darkness a few rods ahead and instantly disappeared.

Still no answer.

"Why you not speak, captain?" demanded Maza, impatiently.

No response; no movement; all was silence.

Maza pulled up his mare, and his quick ear told him that he was alone.

"Maladetta! What is z'is? Where z'e captain and z'e boy?"

He took from his pocket a box of matches, and in the still air of the early morning was able to strike a light and throw a glare all around him.

For a moment the dwarf was dumfounded; but quickly his cunning nature asserted itself, and he felt sure that treachery had left him there alone.

Drawing the long, wavy knife (which, in fact, was a Malay kreese), he gnashed his teeth and flourished the weapon in the air in a spasm of impotent fury.

"What it mean? I find it out! Gr-r-r-r! I found it out! Yes, Dan Duncan, if you play z'e fool wiz' me, you find z'at Maza can bite-bite!" and the hideous creature strained his eyes in his efforts to see through the darkness along the path he had come.

He knew that the Red Bluff gang, whose headquarters were up here in the mountains, were awaiting the arrival of himself and Dan Duncan, and were probably aware that he was near them. They had a system of pickets which made a surprise almost impossible.

Maza felt, however, that before he joined them he must find out what had become of the gambler and the boy, who represented a thousand dollars to him.

He sheathed his kreese, the obedient animal going at a swift pace down the pathway, avoiding the boulders on the rugged trail instinctively.

Suddenly a rifle shot rang out in the stillness, echoing and re-echoing among the rocks.

Maza stopped, and his hand sought his kreese involuntarily, but not before four rough-looking men were at his saddle-bow, while four six-shooters were thrust into his face.

"It is I—Maza!" he explained.

A low chuckle from the man at his left, who had seized his bridle, greeted this announcement, while the three others instantly fell back and were swallowed up in the darkness.

"W'ot's th' trouble, Maza? Whar' did ther shots come from?"

"Below, in z'e valley. Come and see," and without troubling himself to see whether he was followed, Maza sent his mare forward, eager to discover what the disturbance below might mean.

As the dawn sent a gray radiance through the canyon, and enabled him to distinguish things faintly, he saw a man on the earth directly across the path. The silk hat lying by his side, and his well-fitting clothes, dust-covered now, told that it was Dan Duncan.

Maza leaped from his mare and raised the man's head.

"Hurry, Maza, or he'll fool us all," said Dan, faintly, as he staggered to his feet, pistol in hand.

"What you mean? Who will fool us?"

"Silver Sam."

"Where is he?"

"Down in the valley. He stole my stallion, and has been riding with you all night."

CHAPTER V.

ALL AGAINST A WOMAN.

When Alma Moore made her impassioned appeal to the men around her a silence fell upon them.

She had not made a mistake in supposing that an explanation of her position would enlist their sympathies. She knew the naturally gallant disposition of the Western miner, and was confident that she would have friends, if not champions, in most of them, if they could be convinced that she was imposed upon.

"Whar's ye'r child?" asked one man.

"He has it," she answered, quickly, pointing to Dan Duncan.

"Oh, cheese it. Thet's too much fer us," responded the other, with an incredulous grin. "We know Dan Duncan. He ain't er-takin' no one's kid. He hez all he kin do ter flip ther keards 'thout hookin' kids."

Duncan smiled, and stepped out of the room toward the front of the hotel, with Lo Shun, the Chinaman, at his heels.

"Allee samee, you big liar. Mlister Dlan-

can," squeaked Lo Shun, as they reached the veranda.

Duncan aimed a blow at the Chinaman's head, but missed, as the heathen dodged, and jumped to the other end of the veranda, with an exasperating grin.

"Wal, git down off'n thet table," put in the landlord, gruffly, as he held out his hand to Alma.

She took his hand, and leaped lightly down, looking about for Duncan, while the men gathered about the table and straightened out things ready to resume the game.

"Thet cussed Chinaman hez nalled 'bout everything in sight," exclaimed Mug Hinckley. "Blame er Chink, anyhow. He's allers lookin' fer ther best end of it, an' he'd skin his grandmother's wallet at his grandfather's funeral. Whar's Dan Duncan?"

"Here I am," responded Duncan, strolling carelessly into the front doorway, as Alma Moore ran out of the back. "What's ther trouble? I don't keer ter deal any more ter-night. Let Jim Morgan take ther box."

"Why can't you do it, Dan?" asked Jim Morgan, the landlord, as he took the dealer's seat, and began to flip the cards almost as smoothly as Duncan himself.

"I hez business outside."

"Oh!"

Jim Morgan did not say anything more, but went on dealing as if there had been no disturbance to the game, with the possibility of some one being killed, not ten minutes before.

Dan Duncan went out of the back doorway, with the intention of catching Alma Moore. But she had disappeared.

"Gone to her room, I suppose," he muttered. "Well, I don't know what she thinks about this thing. But certainly the most important business I have on hand now is to get that boy into a place of safety. The Red Bluff gang will keep him all right till I want him. As for Alma, she'll come to time."

He looked out of the back door of the house and listened.

"I can hear Maza breathing in the stable. He makes as much noise as a big dog. I will wait till he gets the horses ready, and then, if Alma does not come to time, the boy shall take a short trip to a place of safety. What fools women are, to be sure."

The gambler had perfect faith in Maza, so far as making the arrangements for carrying off the child were concerned. Aubrey had been brought to the Bull Canyon Hotel just that his mother might see him, and thereby be induced, perhaps, to yield to Duncan's desire to make her his wife.

"But I guess it's a failure, this time," thought the gambler, as he stepped into the bar-room again, and watched the faro game with a cynical countenance.

"Thet feller hez some cussed meanness in his mind, I'll sw'ar," said Hinckley, as he dealt the cards. "I've took er likin' ter thet Silver Sam—although he did get me a tarm in San Quentin penitentiary once—an' if there's any cold deck ter be rung in on him, shoot me full o' rusty nails if I don't take er hand in ther game myself, right hyar."

It is not to be supposed that Dan Duncan could read Hinckley's exact thoughts, but he seemed to know that the dealer with the busy fingers was not friendly to him, for an angry glance shot from the gambler's dark eye that could not have been mistaken, if Mug Hinckley had not happened to look over at the Chinaman at that precise moment.

The broad hat worn by Mug Hinckley went flying across the table, hitting the Chinaman squarely in the face, and causing him to drop a handful of chips.

"Yer low-down, yaller varmint! I see yer do thet trick oncet afore, an' ef I ketch yer ag'in, I'll make so many holes in yer thet Jim Morgan kin use yer fer er strainer. Drop them chips! Ther bank wins thet thar' pot."

Lo Shun grinned when he had released his face from the hat, and as he handed the chips to Hinckley, seemed to think he had done rather a smart trick in trying to get what did not belong to him.

At the same moment, Dan Duncan brushed against him, and with the slightest possible movement of his lips, so that no one else noticed it, whispered to Lo Shun:

"Veranda!"

Duncan strolled carelessly to the front veranda, and sat on the railing in the darkness, glancing occasionally at an upper window, behind which was a feeble light, and which he knew was the apartment occupied by Alma Moore.

Five minutes later the Chinaman appeared at the doorway of the hotel, and stood at the edge of the veranda, looking at the black sky as if he were searching for a particular star.

His little beady eyes were otherwise engaged, however, for he was assuring himself that there was no one about save the silent figure that he could just distinguish at the end of the veranda, sitting patiently on the railing.

"Lo Shun!" said Duncan, softly.

The Chinaman noiselessly glided toward him, still with a wary look-out on every side.

"You know Alma Moore?"

The Chinaman thrust his face close to that of the gambler and nodded, while he tried to see the expression in the countenance of the impassive Duncan.

"She may stay in the hotel to-night. Don't let her get away without letting me know where she is."

"Me sabe."

"She thinks you are her friend, doesn't she?"

"Me muchee her fiend, allee samee. She trustee me. Likee good Chinaman. Givee much money to Lo Shun."

"Good! Then you ought to be able to keep your eye on her. I shall be back at the hotel to-morrow some time toward sundown. You be here and tell me what she has done."

"Me sabe."

Hardly were the words out of Lo Shun's mouth when a rustling inside the doorway of the hotel made him slide back, in such a way that any one coming from the hotel would not be likely to notice Dan Duncan in the gloom, with the Chinaman's body masking him in.

"Lo Shun!"

"Yes, Miss Moore."

"Oh, Lo Shun, what shall I do? My boy! I must find my boy! He is somewhere about this hotel, and that devil, Duncan, is keeping him from me."

"Duncan, dlevil! Velly much dlevil. Me find your bloy. Lo Shun muchee your fiend."

The yellow liar said all this in the peculiarly soft tone that the California Chinaman knows so well how to assume, and with the smile "child-like and bland," that is famous all over the world.

"You are a good man, Lo Shun, and when I get my boy you shall be rich. You will help me to find him, will you not?"

"Me swear very muchee me help you."

His eye was squinted toward the end of the veranda to see what Duncan was doing, and he was just in time to see the gambler slip away from the other side of the railing, that he had vaulted over while the Chinaman had held Alma Moore in conversation.

The Chinaman and Alma held a long whispered confab on the veranda, with many strong assertions of eternal fidelity on the part of Lo Shun, and many declarations by Alma Moore that she would reward the Chinaman liberally if he would help her to overcome the machinations of Dan Duncan.

"You think you can find him now, Lo Shun?" said Alma, at length, eagerly.

Lo Shun nodded expressively.

"What shall I do?"

"Stay here. Me soon clome black."

He slipped into the hotel, and, passing through the long hall that ran completely through the house from back to front, he stepped into the darkness behind, and whistled softly.

Dan Duncan was instantly at his side.

"Well?" from the gambler.

"Me fixee things allee rightee. She tink I getee the bloy. Me telle her I hunttee you dlowa, an' getee the bloy now."

"You cussed fool! Why did you tell her that?"

"She come out here if I notee tell her so," was the answer of Lo Shun, with a cunning leer. "Where the bloy?"

"That's what I don't know," answered Duncan, but more to give utterance to his own feelings than with any desire to enlighten the Chinaman. "Maza has gone, and he has the boy with him. The little idiot didn't understand he was to wait for me, I suppose, or else he has left me behind in sheer deviltry."

"Whatee you do, then?"

"I shall have to go after him, up in the mountains. That's all I can do. Go back to Alma Moore, and tell her the boy has been taken away for to-night, but that you can find him for her if she pays you."

"Me sabe."

"Keep her quiet till to-morrow night, somehow. Then I'll fix things afterward. Understand?"

"Me sabe."

The Chinaman was moving away, in his own silent, gliding fashion, when Duncan called him back.

"Lo Shun!"

Without answering, the Chinaman came back.

"You are a member of the Red Bluff gang?"

"Yes."

"You know what they will do with you if you ever give away any of their secrets or disobey orders?"

"They takee Chinaman, cutee off his cue, and cutee off his hands; then hang him to flee, and fire bullets into him; then burn him and throw his ashes over the canyon. After thatee, they whip him with quirts, and putee tar and feathers on him, and then, if he still alivee, they shloot him dead."

The Chinaman delivered himself of this rigamarole with the utmost gravity, and although he knew he was making a burlesque of a serious matter, it was evident to Dan Duncan that Lo Shun was in a wholesome condition of terror of the Red Bluff gang's vengeance on a traitor.

"Git!" commanded the gambler.

Almost simultaneously with the utterance of this word, Lo Shun scooted up the hall of the hotel to the front veranda, where he had left Alma Moore.

Hardly had the Chinaman disappeared, when another figure stole quietly out of the house and stood in the deep shadow, evidently regarding Dan Duncan.

The gambler stood still for a moment, and then went into the stable, to assure himself of what he knew in his heart had taken place—that Maza had gone with the horses and the boy.

The dark figure hastened after him, and as the gambler stepped into the stable, the other followed him and secreted himself in a stall with one of the horses, where he could watch without being discovered.

"I'd give an ounce o' gold dust ter know what thet thar' galoot is after," muttered Mug Hinckley, for he it was who was on the trail of Dan Duncan. "Seems ter me I saw ther two horses of him an' thet cussed dwarf in here. Ah! Sure! They air gone. Now, I see through th' scheme. They've taken away thet kid an' left th' woman ter be fooled. Wal, Mug Hinckley's goin' ter be in this hyar deal, jist ter show thet he ain't altogether a worthless cuss."

At this moment Lo Shun came hurrying into the stable, evidently with the intention of telling something important to Dan Duncan. As he did so, Mug Hinckley happened to step out of the stall, and the Chinaman stumbled over his feet, and sprawled at full length in front of Dan Duncan, assisted by a vigorous blow from the fist of Hinckley.

Lo Shun arose, considerably dazed, without knowing what had hit him, and Duncan, who was unaware of the presence of Hinckley, exclaimed in a fierce, but low tone:

"You yellow idiot! Get ready to go with me to the crib in the mountains right away. And mind what I told you about keeping the secrets of the Red Bluff gang!"

"Oho!" thought Hinckley. "So both

these ornary cusses are in the Red Bluff gang, eh? I begin ter see daylight, right hyar!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SCRAP IN THE CANYON.

Mug Hinckley crept out of the stable and waited for Duncan and the Chinaman to come out. He had made up his mind to follow them, wherever they might go, just to satisfy that love of adventure that is implanted in the bosoms of most men who have lived in the sparsely-settled portions of the country, and that was particularly strong in that of Hinckley.

In a few minutes the gambler came forth, with the Chinaman obediently at his heels, evidently in a proper state of subjection to his masterful companion.

Dark as it was, Mug soon found that Duncan was in a boiling rage.

"Cusses on that fellow!" hissed the gambler. "He has actually got away with Maza and the child, and will find his way into the very heart of the Red Bluff gang if we don't catch up with him."

"Whew! Now I understand thet 'hull thing," muttered Hinckley. "It's ther best move I ever hearn tell of. By gum! Thet Silver Sam is er dandy, an' no mistake."

Without waiting to hear more, Hinckley rushed into the hotel, to the veranda, where he knew that Alma Moore was still sitting, disconsolate and weeping.

"Say, mum," he burst out, as he reached her side.

She drew herself up in disdain as she recognized Hinckley, and said, coldly:

"Have you forgotten the lesson you received this morning?"

"No, mum. I remember all 'bout thet thar', an' I 'low ez Silver Sam wuz right in callin' me down when I made myself too promiseous in offerin' ter help yer out'n ther coach. But this hyar's er new deal, an' I'm squar' when I tell yer ez I only wants ter sarve yer. No man is all bad, an' thar's many er feller in Californy ez is wuss' than Mug Hinckley, by er durned sight."

Something in the man's tone conveyed the ring of truth to Alma Moore, and she felt that she had been perhaps too suspicious, and that at least he deserved to be heard.

"What have you to say?" she asked.

"Jist this: Thar's er mighty dirty feller aroun' this hyar hotel ez is schemin' ag'in' yer, an' who hez ther best of yer at this moment. His name is Dan Duncan."

"Well?"

"Wal, I jist heerd him er-talkin' ter that yaller skunk of er Chink out thar', an' they're goin' up ter ther mountains, whar' they mean ter snatch your kid away from Silver Sam, an' git him whar' you'll not find him."

Alma Moore seized Hinckley convulsively by the arm.

"Man, man, what do you mean?"

"Air yer prepared ter trust me?"

For a brief instant Alma Moore hesitated. Then, with an impulsive toss of her head, she took his rough, hard hand, and answered, solemnly:

"I will trust you. If you deceive me, the vengeance of Heaven must surely fall upon you for treachery to a most wretched mother!"

"Yer kin bank on me ter ther last drop of ye'r blood. My name is Mark Hinckley, an' I ain't got er altogether clean record. But I never went back on my solemn word, an' I ain't er-goin' ter begin now, with er woman."

"Now, what am I to do?"

"Wait here a moment."

As he spoke, Hinckley leaped into the road from the veranda, and listened attentively.

"Jist what I thought. I kin hear 'em scootin' up ther road. Thet's all right. We'll be close ahind 'em afore they've gone far."

He stepped back on the veranda, and told Alma to be ready for a ride on horseback. Without a word she went up-stairs to her room, to prepare herself, and Hinckley sought Jim Morgan, the landlord.

"So yer want two horses, do yer—one of 'em with er side-saddle? Haw! Haw!

"What yer goin' ter do—elope with the widdler?"

If Jim Morgan had known how near he was to being cracked over the head with one of Mug Hinckley's revolvers for his witticism, he would have been surprised.

But Hinckley restrained himself, and only said, quietly:

"I'm not goin' ter elope with nobody, Jim. But Mrs. Moore is er friend of mine, an' she wants me ter ride with her er little ways, and keep off ther wilcats, or anything ez might make it onpleasant fer her on ther way, an' I want to hire ther horses from you. Is thar' anything out o' ther way in thet?"

Jim Morgan stopped chuckling as he saw that Hinckley was in earnest, and answered:

"Wal, thar's thet roan mare. ez is broke ter er lady's saddle, an' big Bonypart, thet used ter be in ther United States cavalry. How'll thet outfit suit?"

"Bully. When'll it be ready?"

"Right now," was the response of Jim Morgan, as he went out to the stable to give the necessary orders.

In ten minutes the two horses were at the front door, with half a dozen guests of the house, who had left their gambling operations to see the departure of Hinckley and Alma, standing on the veranda, and waiting for developments.

"Have yer got er gun?" whispered Hinckley, as Alma appeared, in a blue riding habit that just reached her heels, with a jaunty broad-brimmed hat, trimmed with a single long feather, shading her handsome face.

"Yes. I have my husband's two pistols."

"Ready ter ye'r hand?"

"Loaded and ready," was the quiet, but firm, reply.

"Good! Thar's grit in her," muttered Hinckley, as he saw her leap lightly into the saddle of the roan, without availing herself of his proffered help.

Before the crowd on the veranda realized that the two adventurers were ready to start, they were cantering along the road on their way toward the mountains where the Red Bluff gang had their headquarters.

For some miles they rode along without speaking. Then Alma drew up short, and remarked, with a smile that Hinckley could just distinguish in the faint light of the stars:

"Do you see that tree blazed over there, on the right?"

"Yes. Thar's a bit o' bark about six inches squar' knocked off it. I kin jist make out ther white spot."

"You asked me something about my pistols, and I told you they were ready and loaded. I think I can put a bullet into that white spot from here."

"If you kin, you're er mighty good shot."

Alma Moore laughed softly, and the next minute the report of a pistol rang out, and she signed to Hinckley to examine the spot on the tree.

"Well?"

"You hit it, sure enough. I hope you kin hit one o' them cussed Red Bluff fellers ef it should come ter er scrap."

After this there was nothing said by either till they reached the beginning of the canyon up which the reader has already traveled with Silver Sam and Maza toward the headquarters of the Red Bluff gang.

It was just getting gray with the dawn when they entered the canyon, and Hinckley, who had been through many an adventure as risky as this, looked about him carefully.

He knew that the Red Bluff gang were in the habit of keeping a close watch upon this part of the road, and that there might be a bullet or two whistling about their heads at any moment.

"Hyar comes old Bill Long on ther coach back from Colfax," exclaimed Hinckley, suddenly, and it was not long before they met the coach dashing along, with old Bill Long swearing and cracking his whip over his horses, as they came helter-skelter down the gorge.

"Ther Red Bluff gang let him come

through, anyhow," continued Hinckley. "They don't allers hold him up, but he hez a sight o' treasure aboard to-night, and I kinder think that if they hedn't some other important business on hand, they'd hev' given him er whirl, jist fer luck."

With this philosophical explanation of the escape of the coach from the gang, Hinckley dropped into silence as they plodded slowly up the narrow canyon.

Suddenly, as if from another world, the sound of a horse's hoofs broke upon their ears, loudly, and before Alma realized what she was doing, she was dashing headlong down the gorge after a great horse bearing the double burden of a man and child.

It was Silver Sam and Aubrey Moore.

"Thunderation! Whar' did they come from?" exclaimed Hinckley, involuntarily.

The peculiar formation of the canyon, with two or three sharp curves just above the spot at which Alma and Hinckley had first distinguished the sound of a horse's hoofs, had kept the noise from their ears until the animal was almost upon them.

"By the hokey! Yer can't 'most always tell 'bout these hyar mountains," cried Hinckley, as he turned his horse and galloped after the woman.

For a few hundred yards the three horses kept about the same distance apart. The stallion was the better animal, but he was burdened with the boy as well as the man, and the other two horses therefore had a chance to keep even with him.

The stallion reached a point where the narrow path diverged to the left, while a broad way led up from the valley below, and was, indeed, the main road taken by the stage coaches on their way to Bull Canyon.

"Halt!" commanded a stern voice.

For answer, Silver Sam drew a revolver, and blazed away in the direction of the voice.

The boy awoke, and looked up into the face of his companion wonderingly. Then, with the docility that was part of his nature, he sat quiet, knowing that Silver Sam would take care of him under any circumstances.

Almost simultaneously with Silver Sam's shot came the report of a rifle from a clump of bushes, and the boy shrieked.

"Yer cussed scamp! Come out o' thet!" yelled the voice of Dan Duncan, and the next moment Silver Sam and the gambler were rolling on the ground in a fierce embrace.

"Whoop!" shouted Hinckley, as he bore down upon the scene, with Alma Moore by his side.

The struggle between Silver Sam and Dan Duncan was short and sharp.

Silver Sam did not care to shoot again, even if he could have taken aim, so he held his pistol tightly in his hand, and brought the heavy barrel down with considerable force upon the forehead of the gambler.

Duncan released his hold with a groan, and Silver Sam, snatching Aubrey from the ground where he had dropped him when he leaped from the stallion, sprang into the saddle again, and with a cry to Alma and Hinckley to follow him, swept up the canyon and off to the right, from the main path, as the dwarf, on his mare, galloped down, without seeing any one but the prostrate gambler.

"Thet wuz er narrer squeak," panted Hinckley, as he urged his horse forward to keep up with the stallion and the roan ridden by Alma Moore.

CHAPTER VII.

SILVER SAM A PRISONER.

It may be wondered what had become of the Chinaman when Dan Duncan and Silver Sam met in the shock of battle.

"Me notee going to takee any chances," said the Chinaman to himself as he stood behind Dan Duncan among the bushes, holding the bridles of the two horses, and keeping behind them, so that if any stray shot should come from the main path of the canyon, their bodies might act as a shield.

Lo Shun was a member of the Red Bluff gang, but he was not high in its councils. He was regarded more as a messenger and

spy than anything else, for which his innocent expression and supposed lack of brains fitted him.

As soon as Silver Sam bore down upon Duncan, Lo Shun watched eagerly to see which way the fight would go. If it had happened that Dan had vanquished the other, the Chinaman would have come forth ready to take his share of the glory by making a prisoner of the defeated one.

"Silver Sam is a fighter, as well as a sharp detective," muttered Lo Shun, as he clung closer to the bushes.

"Whar's thet thar' cussed Chinaman?" asked the gambler, as soon as he had explained to Maza that Silver Sam had fooled them by pretending to be Dan Duncan, and riding into the very heart of the Red Bluff gang, with little Aubrey before him.

"Me here, Mistlee Duncan," said the Chinaman, meekly, as he led the two horses into the open space.

"You made a nice job of it. In lettin' thet thar' woman foller us up inter ther mountains, didn't yer, yer yaller-necked lizard! I've er notion ter cut off ye'r feet an' make yer foller me up inter ther mountains on ye'r hands!"

Dan Duncan scowled so fiercely upon the Chinaman that that worthy fully believed the gambler meant all he said, and he slunk a little further away.

"Nevare mind. Maladetta! V'at you trouble wiz' him for? Z'e boy not yet gone. Ve catch Silver Sam if ve go up z'e mountain right away."

"He's gone down into the valley."

Maza only sniffed at this observation of Duncan's. The dwarf knew which way Sam had gone, and that his aim was evidently to go up into the mountains, and then take a cross-cut that would bring him out to the main road, so that he could make his way over into Nevada—to Carson City or Virginia City, whichever he judged to be the most convenient.

The three men, each on horseback, surged up the path after the detective and his companions, with Maza showing the way and the Chinaman lagging behind.

The leader of the Red Bluff gang, who had accompanied Maza, had disappeared, as members of the gang had a way of doing, and neither the gambler nor Maza paid any attention to it.

For half an hour the three swept up the pathway to the right, leaving the gorge on which were the headquarters of the Red Bluff gang, for the time being, although it would be easy to cross over to them from almost any point above, as Maza and Dan both well knew.

There were occasional clumps of bushes along the way, and stately pines cast their long shadows on the road at intervals. But the roadway was generally stony, with loose boulders for the horses to trip over, and plenty of the red dust that the dry season in California produces so liberally.

Maza's little mare stuck to her work gamely, but the horses ridden by Duncan and the Chinaman were not of the kind to stand much hardship, and the gambler thought of his magnificent stallion that had been appropriated by Silver Sam, and ground his teeth in rage over it more than once.

The sun was well up in the heavens when Maza suddenly stopped and held up his hands as a sign for his companions to follow his example.

They were in a wild spot, on the summit of the mountain, and not a sign of human being but themselves was to be seen.

Yet Maza pointed significantly to a grove of pines on the left, that seemed to grow on the very edge of the precipice, and Duncan nodded as if he understood.

For a minute the little group stood watching the pines, and then Lo Shun uttered a slight cry as he caught sight of the blue riding habit of Alma Moore among the trees.

"Maladetta! V'at you do?" hissed Maza, as he aimed a blow at the Chinaman's head with his short riding-whip, and which blow Lo Shun dodged with the agility peculiar to him.

Dan Duncan was already galloping into the pine grove when there were the

sounds of shots, followed by hoarse exclamations of rage, and, as the leader of the Red Bluff gang was seen in a deadly struggle with Silver Sam on the edge of the cliff, Alma Moore, with her boy clasped in her arms, came bounding out of the thicket, straight toward her enemies.

She saw them just as she reached the outside of the grove, and, instinctively holding her child closer to her bosom, she swerved, as if to run up the hill away from them.

"Not yet, Alma!"

With this cry the gambler sprang after her.

"My t'ousand dollars. Maladetta! I hafe you now!" came from Maza, as he joined his master in the chase.

With a speed that would have been wonderful in a woman burdened with a good-sized boy, had it not been that a mother's love gave her almost superhuman strength, Alma Moore actually outstripped the gambler for several hundred yards.

Maza kept at the heels of the gambler at first, and then, seeing that the woman was getting away, he jumped to the front with a bound, as if he had been a badly-made India-rubber ball, and was soon close to the panting woman.

"Stop! Or I shot ye!" he bawled.

Alma's response was a quickening of her steps, so that she seemed almost to fly over the red dust and stones that composed the path.

There was still a mountain on the right side, but some distance away, while on the left was the awful gorge, with its turbulent torrent four thousand feet below, that looked like a thin streak of silver from the giddy heights on which was being played a drama that might yet end in a tragedy.

Along the edge of the precipice grew pines, sometimes in ones, or twos, or threes, and again in thickets that quite hid the fact of their being a chasm just the other side of them.

There was a clump of pines a few hundred feet in front of Alma, and among the trees was a path that led tortuously to a wide road five hundred feet below, and which was well traveled, being, in fact, the main road to Colfax, and thence to Tahoe, a small town on the bank of the beautiful Lake Tahoe, so well known to all residents of Sacramento nowadays as a summer resort. At the period of this story Tahoe was not much of a place, and the lake was in practically its pristine condition of solitude, as it had been since it was part of the possessions of Mexico, before Uncle Sam got California.

"If I can get to those trees," thought Alma, "I may escape. I know the short cut down to the other road, and I may meet some one down there who will help me. In any case, I shall be only a mile from Colfax, or less, and there are miners' cabins all about. I know."

Maza and Dan Duncan knew the character of this part of the gorge as well as Alma Moore, and it was to prevent the woman going down the path through the trees that the dwarf bent all his energies.

"Maladetta! She run like z'e deer," gasped Maza.

"Shoot her! Cuss her!" yelled Duncan.

"Shootee the boy. Thattee bring her to timee. Sabee?"

"The Chink is right," muttered the gambler. "Thet yaller coyote hez more sense than er white man."

He used the slang and dialect of the Western miner when excited, and there was nothing of the polished man of the world—the character the gambler liked to assume—in the wild exclamations and fierce looks of Daniel Duncan now, as he pursued the woman he professed to love, with murder in his heart.

"Git ter one side, Maza!" he commanded.

Maza turned and saw Duncan deliberately taking aim at the child in Alma's arms.

"Vat you do?" he yelled.

"Git away."

"Stop! Maladetta! Stop!"

Bang went Duncan's pistol, and Alma Moore fell headlong to the ground.

"Cuss it! Hev' I hit her, after all?"

The gambler rushed forward to see what his bullet had done, but Maza, now that he saw Alma Moore brought down, ceased his impetuous efforts to get to her quickly, and smiled carelessly as he walked after Duncan.

The dwarf had jumped back and struck up the arm of Duncan just as he had fired, and Maza could have told the gambler what had become of the bullet without examining the head of Alma Moore.

"Alma! What is it?" cried Duncan, in an agony of remorse, as he sank upon his knees at her side on the rocky ground.

Then Dan Duncan saw that under Alma and her boy was the squirming form of Lo Shun, and that the woman had doubtless tripped over him.

"Takee her off!" begged the Chinaman.

Maza seized Alma by the arm, and, with the extraordinary strength that he used so easily, pulled her to her feet with one hand, while he snatched her boy from her with the other.

Alma Moore uttered a shriek of despair as she saw her child in the power of the dwarf, while, at the same instant, the leader of the Red Bluff gang received reinforcements in the persons of two members of his band, and Silver Sam was a prisoner.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE GANG'S STRONGHOLD.

In a quarter of an hour the whole party were in the secret home of the Red Bluff gang in the mountains.

Silver Sam looked curiously about him as he was led, with his companions, to a giant pine that stood at the side of one of the narrow paths that traversed the sides of the mountains in all directions.

As soon as he saw the tree he knew that he was near the entrance of the cavern in which the most famous band of marauders in California made their home. It had often been described to him, but, so careful were the band to keep their retreat a secret, that even Silver Sam, sharp detective as he was, had never been able to come across it.

There were two ways of reaching this spot, Silver Sam noted. One was by the path they had just come, through the grove of trees at the edge of the precipice, and down over rocks that looked solid, but that could be moved by two or three men, and rolled back again, provided the trick of it was known.

The leader of the gang, a broad, powerful man, with a smooth-shaven face and close-cropped hair, went first, and directed the movements of his companions in clearing away and replacing obstructions, and Silver Sam tried to keep in his mind all that was done, so that he might be able to find his way by himself on some future occasion, if he should ever have the chance to hunt down the gang into whose hands he had so unexpectedly fallen.

The other road to the cavern was from a point a long way down the valley, and in an altogether different direction from that which the reader has taken in company with the personages of this narrative.

It led up the other side of the valley, along the side of the canyon, with the roar of the stream below ever in the ears, and bewildering the unaccustomed traveler so that he would be in danger perpetually of losing his footing, and tumbling to his death down the chasm that seemed to actually draw him to destruction.

Although it seemed as if the path would hardly afford a footing even to man, the marks of hoofs proved that horses made their way up there at times.

Winding and twisting, the path led up and up; until, at length, it came forth on the very face of the bluff and overhung the terrific depths. But here it stopped, and there was nothing for the wayfarer to do but to either step off into space or retrace his steps to the valley.

Here it was that the Red Bluff gang had made arrangements to protect this side of their stronghold. Immediately opposite the end of the path, but separated from it by a gulf some twenty feet wide, was the great pine, which, as Silver Sam knew, marked the entrance to the quarters of the gang.

The tree grew close to the rocky wall, and its upper branches seemed to be entwined in the short-limbed bushes that covered the rocks.

How any one was to reach that tree from the opposite side of the gorge was a puzzle to the stranger, but when Silver Sam was led to the tree and saw how entrance to the cavern was effected, he understood the arrangement at once. He smiled quietly, as he thought that perhaps the Red Bluff gang had not accomplished such a victory over him as they believed, after all.

The leader of the gang moved toward the big tree and hit it a smart blow with the butt of his Winchester. There was a pause of a few moments, and then the tree bent over from the top till it lay at an angle of nearly forty-five degrees, disclosing an opening in the rocks behind it, leading into impenetrable darkness.

"Git in!" commanded the leader, looking significantly at Silver Sam.

Sam obeyed, and the others followed, Bob Duncan bringing up the rear with the leader of the gang.

Then the great tree swung back into its place, and Silver Sam waited impatiently for the next move.

He had made up his mind that things were not at all bad, and although the gang had the whip-hand of him just now, he was confident that he would circumvent them yet.

"Ho, theer you hare, hay?" cried a female voice, so near to Silver Sam that he started involuntarily. "Hi thought as 'ow you wouldn't be back for a hour yet."

A flood of light burst upon the group, as a great locomotive headlight was unveiled, showing that the party stood in a large, lofty apartment, hollowed out of the solid rock, but furnished in as comfortable a manner as many a city home.

The headlight was fastened to the wall at the other end of the cave, and there was a heavy wooden shutter, so made that not a single ray of light could find its way through it, which was made to swing in front of the lantern at will.

Around the walls were hung weapons of all kinds, from the picturesque yataghan of the East to the modern Colt's revolver and Winchester repeating rifle that had just come into use in the United States.

Luxurious rugs of buffalo hide, properly dressed, were scattered over the floor and on settees and big chairs, and there was a handsome oaken cabinet, curiously inlaid, and with plate-glass doors, at one side, revealing bottles and silver vessels, suggestive of conviviality when the gang had made some good haul that warranted a treat for its members.

In the center of the room was a large dining table, spread with a tempting array of fine chinaware, in which were many of the beautiful fruits of the Golden State, such as plums, pears, grapes, and the luscious nectarine.

"Breakfast!" commanded the leader, briefly, to a wholesome-looking, ruddy-faced, plump woman of about thirty, who was the owner of the voice they had heard in the darkness.

"Hall right, Capt'in. Me 'usband an' me 'as heverythin' ready, an' hall we hasks is ez you will heat with a good appetite."

The leader, who answered to the title of Captain, took no notice of the politeness of the woman save to grunt, as he brought forth from a corner a child's high chair, and directed the attention of Aubrey to it with a peremptory gesture.

The boy drew his chair up to the table, at the right of a big chair at the head of the table, and took his seat without a word. The captain motioned Alma Moore to a chair at the other side of the boy, and she sank into it, taking her boy's hand fondly in her own.

"Wal, Silver Sam, you are welcome ter ther palace of ther gang," said Dan Duncan, mockingly. "Ther captain will give yer some breakfastan' treat yer royally, in spite of ye'r cussed meanness."

Silver Sam looked carelessly at Duncan, and allowed his glance to wander inquiringly about the room, without any sign of apprehension, as he answered:

"Very good of you, I am sure. But I've been traveling all night, and I'd like to have a chance to wash my hands and face, if it is all the same to you."

"Mighty pertickler 'bout ye'r appearance, ain't yer? I guess I like ter look neat, ez well ez ther next man, but I kin git along without er wash fer a while, an' you'll hev' ter do so too."

"Oh, let him wash himself," interposed the captain, adding, to Silver Sam, "Foller Mrs. Plympton inter ther kitchen, an' she'll show yer whar' yer kin fix ye'rself. Yer won't want ter wash ye'rself many more times, prob'ly."

Disregarding the ominous suggestion in the last part of the captain's speech, Silver Sam followed Mrs. Plympton through a doorway hidden by heavy brocaded curtains, and walking along a short hallway, found himself in another large room, well fitted up as a kitchen.

"Well, Bob," said Silver Sam, familiarly, as he slapped upon the back a short, stout man, in a cook's apron and white cap, who was busy over the range.

The short, stout man turned, and, after one quick glance into Silver Sam's face, seized his hand and wrung it with a vigor that proved how glad he was to see the detective.

"W'y, 'ow are yer? 'Oo'd ha' thou't o' seein' you 'ere? Yer don't mean ter say as you've j'ined this 'ere gang, do yer?"

"Hush, Bob. You must not seem to know me, now."

"Hall right. I'm fly," answered Bob, as he turned to the range and touched up the steak he was broiling.

"Yer want ter hurry in hyar, you?" growled one of the gang, who poked his head through the curtains that divided the kitchen from the hallway, and looked suspiciously about.

The man had, fortunately, not been able to hear what the detective and Bob Plympton had said, but he had heard their voices, and he did not approve of their holding any conversation at all.

"Hit's hall right. I won't 'ave the breakfast ready fer ten minutes, yet, an' you can tell the capt'in so," interrupted Bob Plympton. "So let this man 'ave time ter wash 'issself. An' you git hout of my kitchen, too, Si Slack. You know the capt'in won't let hany of you fellers come botherin' me, hif 'e knows it."

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Si Slack, with an ugly frown, as he fingered the butt of his revolver.

"W'ot, you'd draw one o' them pop-guns on me, would yer? Now, you 'ooff it, im-mejitly."

Bob Plympton had an ugly-looking butcher knife in his hand, and as Si Slack hesitated a moment at the doorway, the cook sprang at him, knife in hand, and with a determination in his face that the other understood evidently, for he did not stand upon the order of his going, as he leaped through the curtains, and made his way back to the dining-room to report to the captain.

"I ain't a-goin' to 'ave them hidjits tell me nothin' about w'ot Hi'm goin' ter do. Hi'm at the 'ead of this 'ere kitchen."

Bob Plympton took off his white cap to cool his brow after the excitement, and exhibited a head as smooth as a big billiard ball, with a narrow fringe of light hair just above his ears.

Mrs. Plympton had stood quietly at one side during the foregoing scene, waiting till her lord and master should condescend to give her his attention. For he had trained her to be silent when he was busy.

"Betsy, this 'ere's my pertickler friend, Mr. Samivel Wallace, of Sacramento, New York, and hother places. 'E is a gov'ment detective, an' 'e's known around these 'ere parts as the Shasta Sport. On top of hall that, 'e's w'ot we hused ter call in hold Lunnon a toppin' good feller. Treat 'im haccordingly. Do yer 'ear?"

"Yes, Bob," answered Betsy Plympton, submissively.

Bob went on cooking his steak, and Betsy Plympton bestowed an admiring glance upon the mild-appearing young man in spectacles, whom she now learned was the man whose name was a terror to rascals all over the West.

She led him to an adjoining apartment, where he found a handsome stationary washstand of marble, with running water, soap, towels and all convenience.

All the rooms were lighted by locomotive headlights, and although there was not a sign of daylight, the whole place was as light as if the sun had free access to it.

Silver Sam had finished his ablutions, and was arranging his light hair with his pocket-comb before a large mirror that hung upon the wall, when his arm was touched, and turning quickly, he found Bob Plympton.

"W'ot's this 'ere mean?" asked Bob, as he glanced behind him to make sure that they were alone.

"I'm after that boy, and I must get him. I was taken prisoner by the gang and brought in here. That's all I know."

"W'ot are they goin' ter do with yer?"

"I don't know."

"You are in great danger."

"I suppose so," answered Silver Sam, carelessly.

"S'elp me bob, but you are a plucky un'."

"Thanks."

There was no doubt about the sincerity of Bob's admiration for the detective, and Silver Sam appreciated it.

"Now, look 'ere, Silver Sam. Hi'm 'ere 'cause they hofferred me good wages ter come. But I don't believe in the kind of goings on as they do. Hi'm goin' ter git hout ez soon ez Hi can. An' Hi think this 'ere would be the best time ter do it, 'cause I can 'elp you, an' you can 'elp me."

"Go on."

"Hi've sent Betsy inter the dinin'-room with the grub, 'cause I don't trust er woman with no secrets. There ain't no woman ez kin keep 'er mouth shut, no matter 'ow good she may be in hother ways, an' Betsy is ez bad ez hany of 'em."

"She's loyal enough to you, I hope."

"The best woman as 'ever lived, in beverything but 'er tongue," answered Bob Plympton, warmly.

"You mean to help me to get out of this place, with the boy and its mother?"

"Must you take 'em with yer?" asked Bob, somewhat dubiously.

"That's what I am here for."

"Hall right. You can lay hall you've got on me. Hi'll stick to yer, hand to the kid and hits mother, as well. Look hout, 'ere's somebody a-comin'."

Bob Plympton had only just time to get back to his range, and busy himself with some gravy, when the captain of the gang came in, and, looking sharply around, motioned to Silver Sam to follow him to the dining-room.

CHAPTER IX.

FOOLED BY THE COOK.

As Silver Sam took his seat by the side of the captain, at the end of the table opposite to Alma Moore, who sat near Dan Duncan, he had plenty of opportunity to see who were his companions.

Besides the captain, whose name, he now discovered, was Lionel Bolton, four members of the gang were seated at the table, two on each side. Each man had his pistols in his belt, which was well supplied with cartridges, but the Winchester rifles, which they always carried when they were out on a robbing expedition, were in a corner behind Silver Sam.

The four men were all of one type. They were men with high cheek-bones and sharp, small eyes. Two of them were heavily bearded, but the other two were smooth-faced young fellows, each with a long, straggling mustache, that had been trained to stick out, but that drooped disconsolately this morning—probably because its wearer had had no time to bestow upon his personal appearance after the busy night.

There was no lack of food. It was of excellent quality and well served, on good plates, with silver vessels for the sugar, milk, salt and other accessories.

The cooking was as good as that of any first-class hotel in America, for Bob Plympton was an artist in his way, and he would have given the gang a splendid meal if he had intended to poison them with it.

The meal over, Betsy Plympton cleared the table, and Bob Duncan rapped on the table for order. Every man of the gang paid deferential attention to what he might be going to say.

"Now, boys," began the gambler, "you hev' with yer ter-day er feller ez it 'ud pay us all to wipe out."

"Good!" exclaimed Si Slack, with a bang on the table with his open hand.

"Shut up, Si!" commanded the captain, sternly. "When you air required ter disturb ther perceedin's I'll let yer know. Make er break like thet ag'in, an' it will cost yer ye'r sheer of ther next job we do."

"What is thet man doin' in hyar?" demanded Dan Duncan, pointing to Bob Plympton, who was standing at the other side of the curtains, peering into the dining-room, and evidently listening to all that was being said, with much interest.

"Git out!" cried the captain, and Bob Plympton disappeared, as Si Slack, obeying a silent hint from the captain, took his station at the curtains to make sure that Plympton had really gone back to his own part of the place—the kitchen.

"You all know Silver Sam, the Shasta Sport, and you know that he has been workin' ag'in' us fer more'n er year," went on Duncan.

The scowls of the men around the table at Silver Sam were enough to make any brave man quail, but if there were any fears in the bosom of the quiet young fellow with the light hair and spectacles, they were not visible in his face.

"Now, boys, ther case is jist hyar. This hyar woman hez promised ter be my wife, an' she would hev' kept her word if Silver Sam hadn't p'izened her mind ag'in' me. He hez made her almost hate me, instead o' lovin' me, as she used ter."

"You scoundrelly liar!" burst from Alma Moore's trembling lips, as she passed her arm around her boy, and drew him close to her heart.

"See?" remarked Duncan, imperturbably. "She dun'no' what she's er-sayin', an' it's all through thet skunk, Silver Sam. Now you know thet I hate him ez bad ez any man kin hate another one. Yet I'm generous, an', ez I'm interested in ther Red Bluff gang ez much ez any of yer, thar' is no doubt 'bout my talkin' fer your good, ez well ez me own."

"Maladetta! V'at you mean? Come to z'e point," growled Maza.

"Yes. The ppointee—rightee quicke," chirruped Lo Shun.

Lionel Bolton picked up a plate containing grapes, and slammed it, grapes and all, upon the Chinaman's head.

The plate broke, and bunches of grapes clung about the Chinaman's head, partly smashed, making him such a curious object that everybody around the table laughed involuntarily, even Alma Moore joining in the mirth for an instant.

"The point is this," resumed Dan Duncan. "I mean ter marry this woman, right hyar, an' when I've married her, I propose ter turn Silver Sam loose, an' give him er chance ter git out of this part of ther country. Ef he doesn't go right quick, why, he knows what we most ginerally do with horse thieves."

"Horse thieves?" exclaimed Silver Sam, his indignation forcing the words from him.

"Silver Sam stole my black stallion," continued the gambler, coldly, "and ef thet ain't horse stealing, what is? Hows'ever, I am hyar ter hev' ther knot tied with Alma Moore, and when thet is done, Silver Sam kin git out."

"You villain!" burst from Alma Moore. "You—"

"Silence!" interrupted Bolton. "This hyar marriage hez got ter go, an' you may ez well make up yer mind about it. I hold er commission ez justice of ther peace fer this hyar county, an' I kin tie yer up ez solid ez any man in Californy. Git over hyar, Daniel!"

Lionel Bolton arose from his seat and brought forth a law book that contained the formula of the civil ceremony of marriage for the State, and Si Slack produced a certificate that the contracting parties must sign.

Duncan walked around to the side of Alma Moore and grinned triumphantly.

"Come, Alma, you hev' ter do it, an' yer may ez well be quiet about it. Drive ahead, captain!"

Alma Moore arose to her feet, with her arm still around her boy, and looked defiantly into the face of the gambler, while Silver Sam tried to understand what was taking place, and to see some way of preventing the success of this devilish conspiracy against the woman.

It seemed to him that nothing could be done at present, for there were half a dozen revolvers in the hands of the people around the table, including Maza and the Chinaman, and he knew that any decided movement on his part would be the signal for a fusillade that would stretch him a corpse on the instant.

Bolton took his station on the other side of Alma Moore, and after mumbling a few words from the book so quickly that it was impossible for her to understand their import, he concluded with the declaration, in a loud voice, "I pronounce you man and wife."

Alma Moore looked at him with an expression of withering scorn, and as Dan Duncan tried to take her hand, she snatched it away from him and dealt him a blow in the face that staggered him, and caused him to turn livid with rage.

He half drew a pistol, but instantly pushed it back into its case with a sneering smile, as Si Slack produced a book and laid it on the table.

"Hyar you air! Sign ye'r name hyar," ordered Bolton, pointing to a certain line in the book with the pen that he offered to the gambler. Dan Duncan took the pen, and, with a flourish, signed his name.

"Now, Mrs. Moore, it's your turn," and Bolton thrust the pen into her hand.

Before she could say anything there was a crash, and the room was in darkness.

Silver Sam had seized a wine bottle from the table and hurled it at the locomotive headlight, smashing the glass, and putting out the light.

Bang! Bang! went a couple of revolvers, the flash as they were discharged showing that every one was on the move.

"Look out! Guard the door!" bawled Bolton, as he sprang toward the outer door.

"Plympton!" yelled Duncan. "Bring a light!"

"Allo! W'ot's the matter?" asked Bob, calmly, as he brought a flickering candle into the room.

Dan Duncan glanced hastily around him, and saw that Alma Moore, Silver Sam and the child had all disappeared.

"Z'e boy! My t'ousand dollars! Where are z'ey?" cried Maza, as he dashed into the kitchen and examined each of the rooms in the place, one after the other.

"They can't be gone," assumed Duncan. "Bolton, whar' d'yer think they air hid-in'?"

"Only one place they could be gone, an' they're not likely ter find thet 'ithout some one ter show 'em."

"Whar' d'yer mean?"

"Ther cellar."

"Go and look."

Into the kitchen ran Dan Duncan and Bolton, leaving Maza and the rest to keep guard, in case the fugitives should try to get out by the main doorway.

Bob Plympton was already back in his kitchen, calmly going about his work of cleaning the silver and straightening the room after the disorder necessarily attendant upon preparing a big meal, the remains of which had formed the dinner of himself and his wife in the kitchen, and which they had only just finished.

Duncan hastily glanced at the floor, which was spread with oilcloth, firmly nailed down.

"They can't be gone down thar'," he said. "Yer see ther oilcloth is nailed down, an' it hez never been disturbed."

"W'ot are yer talkin' habout?" asked Bob Plympton, looking inquiringly from one to the other.

"Pull up thet thar' oilcloth!" commended Bolton.

"Pull it hup ye'rself. W'ot the bloomin' 'Alifax are yer talkin' about, with ye'r horders? Hi'm a chef, an' it's my b'izness ter cook wittles, not to pull up hoiicloth."

As he spoke, Bob Plympton planted himself in a chair in the middle of the kitchen, and lighting a clay pipe, smoked defiantly.

"That's right, Robert," chimed in Betsy Plympton. "Hi should like ter ketch my 'usband doing sich menial work, I don't think. Git that nawsty yaller Chinaman ter do it, hif it 'as ter be done. But Hi don't see w'ot the kitchen 'as got ter be hall tossed hup for, jist ter please a lot o' men ez is not 'arf ez good ez my 'usband."

"Lo Shun!" shouted Bolton, going to the hallway.

"What wantee?" squealed the Chinaman, from the dining-room.

"Come hyar an' see, yer yaller worm," replied Dan Duncan, angrily.

"Me not wormee," expostulated the Chinaman, as he poked his head into the kitchen through the curtains.

"You'll be a dead Chink ef yer don't quit talkin' back," declared Bolton, half laughing, in spite of himself, at Lo Shun's indignant protest. "Git down on ye'r marrer-bones an' pull up thet thar' oilcloth."

"Now, look here, Mr. Bolton," interposed Mrs. Plympton, as she came forward, and, placing her arms akimbo, looked the captain in the face. "This 'ere kitchen is my 'usband's and mine, an' I don't mean ter 'ave ther place all hupset ter humor you nor no hother man. Hif you are ready to pay me an' my 'usband, we'll git hout, at once, and you can do w'ot you like with the hoiicloth. But while we stays 'ere, we wants things decent, and we are goin' ter 'ave 'em so."

"You'll git somethin' ez will hurt yer, if yer don't quit ye'r foolin'," replied Bolton, whose temper was getting worse every moment.

Up jumped Bob Plympton, dashing his clay pipe to fragments on the floor as he did so, while he threw himself into an attitude of defense worthy of Jim Corbett.

"Hany man ez talks to my wife like that 'as ter fight me. Come hon, both on yer, an' Hi'll lick the daylights out on yer. Come hon!"

Bob Plympton had been a sparrer in "hold Hengland," as he often used to say, and he enjoyed a "mill" occasionally, when he could find any one worthy of his prowess.

He felt that it would give him the greatest pleasure to plant his fist in the faces of the two men who had come into his kitchen giving him humiliating orders, and he was not the least afraid of the ugly revolvers that were so dangerously near to the hands of both men.

It was not the purpose of Bolton to quarrel with his cook at this time. Besides, he realized that he was wasting time, and that if the fugitives really had found their way to the cellar, the opening to which was in the kitchen floor, immediately under the spot that Bob Plympton had occupied with his chair before he had risen to hurl defiance in their teeth, they were enjoying a pretty good opportunity to get clean away.

"Thet's all right, Bob. I didn't mean nothin'," replied Bolton, in a conciliatory tone. "Let ther Chink git at thet thar' oilcloth, an' if we don't find nothin', thar' won't be no harm done, an' we'll leave your kitchen jist ez good ez we find it."

"Ho, will yer?" put in Betsy. "Hand hif my 'usband is satisfied, Hi ain't. Hit's ez much my kitchen ez it is 'is, an' Hi won't 'ave no nawsty Chinaman pullin' up hoiicloth, to please nobody."

"Oh, git out!" exclaimed Bolton, petulantly, as he pulled the woman away, and sent her spinning against her husband.

Like a flash Bob Plympton's right fist shot out, and it was only by Dan Duncan's throwing Bolton to one side, that the captain of the Red Bluff gang escaped a blow that would have given him a beautiful black eye.

"Do er thing like thet ag'in, Bob Plympton, an' I'll bore er hole in yer with er bullet," hissed the gambler, fiercely, and Plympton saw that he meant what he said.

"Whar's ye'r claw-hammer?" continued Duncan, when he saw that the cook and his wife had ret' in dudgeon to the

other end of the kitchen. "This Chinaman must have somethin' ter use ter git this oilcloth up."

"Ow do Hi know where the 'ammer is? I don't use 'ammers in cooking—not even for cooking beefsteak."

"You hev' a hammer somewhar'. Produce it."

There was a stern ring in Dan Duncan's voice which told the cook that it would be unsafe to fool any longer, and with a snort of defiance he went to a certain drawer in a dresser and brought forth a hammer, on the handle of which was some grease, not yet hardened, showing that it had been lately used by some one with a greasy hand.

"Thet thar' oilcloth hez been moved jist now," observed Duncan, as he saw the grease. "Bob Plympton, I'll 'tend to your case after er while."

"You may attend to it now, hif yer like. Hi don't want ter stay 'ere no longer. Hi wouldn't cook fer sich er set of rascals at any price hafter this—hespecially w'en you hinsult my wife."

Dan Duncan paid no attention to the remarks of Plympton, for he was down on his knees, and had already pulled up the oilcloth, which he saw now had been removed and hastily nailed down again.

Under the oilcloth was a large trap-door, with a ring sunk into the wood, by which the gambler pulled up the door and revealed a steep flight of steps.

"They air down hyar, sure," he shouted to Bolton. "Gimme er lantern, quick."

Half a minute later Bolton and Duncan, followed by Lo Shun, had descended the steps into the mysterious place which they called the "cellar," and Plympton shut down the door with a bang.

Then he turned toward his wife with a grin all over his fat face as he took off his white cap and wiped his shining head on a big red handkerchief.

"Them fellers think as they kin git the best of me. Hi think Hi 'eld 'em for ten minutes, hat least, and hunless Silver Sam is a good deal slower that 'e used ter be, 'e must 'ave cut 'is lucky by this time, an' 'ave the lady an' little Haubrey hall safe houtside. 'E is not the cove ter forget that Hi 'elped 'im, too, an' then kept them blokes talkin' 'bout nothin' while 'e got away. Ho, Hi'm the boy as kin do it, hey, Betsey?"

"Yes, Hi'm proud of my 'usband," averred Betsy, "and wasn't hit funny to 'ear them hasking fer the 'ammer, an' you honly jist 'ad time ter put it haway afore they come in. Ho, it was hexcellent!"

And Mr. and Mrs. Plympton both sat back in their respective chairs and laughed so loudly that Maza came in to see what was going on.

CHAPTER X.

A TEST OF COURAGE.

When Dan Duncan and Bolton, with the other members of the gang, took their prisoners into the crib of the gang, Mug Hinckley managed to keep out of sight.

"Won't do no good fer me ter be cotched, too," he muttered, "and I kin p'raps be of some use ef I watch what they do and whar' they go. I know thet thar' crib must be somewhar' hereabouts, an' ef I kin find it I may git the reward fer givin' it away ter ther 'thorities, 'sides gittin' ther best of Dan Duncan. He hez allers been mighty persnickety with me, an' now he's played sich low-down dirt on er blamed good woman like this hyar Alma Moore, I ain't got no use fer him, no-how."

So, when the prisoners were marched away, there was a dark shadow on their trail, and it was the shadow of Mug Hinckley.

The gang had taken all the horses with them, and as Mug kept behind them he saw that the horses were carefully stowed away in a cave a little lower down the canyon than the big pine tree that hid the entrance to the crib.

"I don't believe in stealin' horses, but they've taken ther two horses ez I hired of Jim Morgan fer ther woman an' me, an' I think when I take them back, after a while, I'll hev' er right ter snake ther big

stallion an' ther mare along with 'em. Ther gang hez er pow'ful sight of horses in ther stable, anyhow, and I s'pose most on 'em has been stolen."

With considerable satisfaction Mug noticed that the stable was not fastened in any way. Evidently the gang placed its trust for security in the fact that the entrance to the stable was hidden by a heap of brushwood, so that it would not be easy to find by a stranger.

"Wal, thet's er good scheme, thet tree," observed Mug, to himself, as he watched from a little distance the operation of effecting an entrance into the cave, and saw the tree swing back into place.

He waited to make sure that the coast was clear, and then strolled down to the tree, keeping a sharp lookout on all sides to guard himself against treachery and a surprise. No one knew better than Mug Hinckley that a band of outlaws like the Red Bluff gang would not be likely to leave their hiding-place without the protection of pickets for very long.

"Seems ter be ez quiet ez er played-out cemetery," he observed, when he had been up and down the gorge without seeing or hearing any one. "Now, what am I ter do?"

It was, indeed, a perplexing position in which Mug found himself. He was morally certain that the woman he had promised to protect was in the power of the Red Bluff gang, and yet he could not get at her.

"I ain't goin' ter desert her, thet's sure," he thought. "I told her I'd stick to her, an' though Mug Hinckley hez er good many black marks ag'in' him, I guess, he never went back on his word ter er woman, an' he ain't goin' ter begin now—no, sirree."

He had taken his position a little above the entrance to the cave, where he could hide behind a large tree, and was thinking what he should do, when some movement of the tree in front of the cave made him drop flat upon his face, to escape observation, while at the same moment he could look out and see all that was going on.

The tree swung a little way out, and two members of the gang, whom he did not recognize, came forth, and looked cautiously about. Each was armed with a Winchester rifle, ready for use, and the usual pistols were in their belts, one on either side.

The big tree that guarded the entrance to the cave was in a peculiar position. It was nearly at the end of the narrow path from which it grew, and the spot on which Hinckley stood was at the extreme end, so that he could not get away without coming down past the cave again, unless he were to jump off into space, and take a little tumble of several thousand feet.

"Kin we git down to ther outside hole in time ter head 'em off?" said one of the men, none other than our friend, Si Slack.

"Si, you air ther most wooden-headed feller in ther gang," returned his companion, Lionel Bolton. "Ther opening is three miles away by ther road, an' they kin be out thar' in ther canyon an' halfway ter Tahoe afore we could git anywhar' near 'em."

"What's ther matter with climbin' down ther Devil's Ladder?"

Bolton turned completely around to look his companion in the face.

"Do yer mean thet?"

"I allers mean what I say," answered Si Slack, sullenly, for he was annoyed at being called wooden-headed.

"You will go down ther Devil's Ladder?"

"I will be one ter go down."

"Oh, yer won't take ther risk ye'rself?"

"I said I'd be one. Thet'd be takin' ther risk, wouldn't it? If I fell off inter ther gorge, it would be jist ez bad if thar' wuz er dozen fellers goin' down ther Ladder ez if I wuz alone, wouldn't it?"

"It's almost sartin death."

"I know it."

Bolton mused for a moment.

"See hyar, Si, an' listen ter me. I don't know who thar' is in ther gang ez would want ter do thet, but it's er great chance fer you."

"I don't see it. Unless yer mean ez it's er chance fer me ter git me brains dashed out."

"Thet wouldn't hurt you," grinned Bolton, but added, quickly, as he saw that the significance of the sneer was understood by Si, for a wonder, "How's'ever, thar' hev' been men go down ther Ladder 'ith-out gittin' killed, an' I don't see why you can't do it."

"I'll be one ter go down," repeated Si, quietly.

Hinckley was lying behind a stump, with his body partly hidden by the coarse brush, and his mind was actively at work trying to comprehend what the conversation meant. He did not know what the Devil's Ladder was, but he understood that it was some perilous means of descent into the canyon, and he waited to hear more.

"If thar's ter be any climbin' down er ladder—Devil's Ladder or anything else—I guess Mug Hinckley kin climb ez well ez any chump in ther Red Bluff gang," he muttered.

At this instant Dan Duncan, his face distorted with passion, joined the other two, and a moment later the evil countenance of Maza appeared.

"They've got erway. Thet's cl'ar," remarked Dan, as he looked up and down the path, making Hinckley shrink closer into the brush behind his stump, for he knew that Duncan's eyes were almost preternaturally sharp.

"Maladetta! Z'ey must not got away. My t'ousan' dollars!"

"Shut up! You ain't ther most important feller in this hyar snarl!" growled Si Slack.

With impish spite the dwarf ran between Slack's knees, and, seizing his legs, turned him over on his back as neatly as could be done by a professional wrestler.

"Now, look hyar," said Duncan, sternly, to prevent any reprisals by Si Slack. "Thar's no time fer scraps atween ourselves. This hyar Silver Sam is at ther bottom uv this business, an' he's taken away my wife. I've got ter hev' her, an' ez fer him, why, I'll hev' him in jail fer abduction ez soon ez I catch him."

"What er dandy uv er scoundrel thet Dan Duncan is," remarked Mug, to himself. "Ez if he would dar' ter go near er jail! Thet's er great bluff he's er-givin' them ducks."

"What air yer goin' ter do 'bout it?" asked Bolton. "They's got inter ther cellar, an' of course they're out uv ther place be this time. We made thet short cut fer ourselves, in case ther crib got too hot fer us. We made it so ez ther officers could never ketch up with us, an' now, be ther great horn spoon, we're fooled by our own 'rangements. Ther drinks air on us, sure."

"Thar's one way uv headin' them off," suggested Duncan, looking cautiously from one to the other, as if to see what they thought about it.

"Ther Devil's Ladder," added Lionel. Duncan nodded.

"I told Si Slack thet he might go down thet way, but he don't seem ter see it."

"I said I'd be one ter go down. Tell ther truth," put in Si, as he brushed the sleeve of his shirt with his hand, and pulled himself together after his tumble.

"Which means that you are afraid," suggested Duncan, coldly.

"Wal, every one in ther gang knows ez thar' is er yaller streak in Si Slack," added Lionel.

"It's er lie!"

"Of course. Sich things is allers lies. But I think ez this would be er good chance ter show what thar' is in yer, all ther same."

"I ain't takin' no sich risks jist fer glory."

Dan Duncan smiled. He thought he saw the way out of his difficulty, and he acted promptly.

"How much do yer want ter go down ther Ladder?"

"Three thousand dollars," answered Si Slack, hitching up his belt, carelessly.

"Maladetta! I only git a t'ousan' dollars fer my share."

"I don't keer what yer git, or if yer don't git nothing," replied Slack, looking

at the dwarf, malevolently. "I've told my price, an' I won't go back on it."

"I'll give you three thousand dollars," said the gambler, quietly. "Now, if you hev' ez much pluck ez you say, you kin jist go down ther Devil's Ladder an' earn ther money."

Si Slack hesitated.

"Thar', I told yer thet thar' wuz er yaller streak in yer, an' thar' it is," shouted Bolton, triumphantly. "All thet about bein' one ter go down wuz er bluff, ez I knew it wuz."

"I ain't skeered. I—"

"Thet's all right," interrupted Duncan. "Air yer goin' ter take thet three thousand dollars or not. You know thet one man hez ter go down fust, an' fix ther ladder so ez ther rest kin foller. Sayin' you'd be one ter go down don't amount ter nothin', 'cause we'll all go down, o' course, ez soon ez ther ladder is fixed. It's ther fixin' ez'll try some feller's nerve."

"When do I git the money? Suppose I wuz ter do ther trick, an' then not get paid?"

Dan Duncan's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Did Dan Duncan ever go back on his word, or is thar' any man ez will dar' ter say so?" he demanded, hoarsely, as his right hand wandered involuntarily toward his pistol.

"Thet's all right, Dan, I know I kin take your word. Thet's not ther point," stammered Si.

"Z'e only p'int is ez you are 'fraid," put in Maza, with a grin that showed all his yellow teeth, like a dog snarling. "But you can stay up here wiz' z'e rest of z'e gang till z'ere is a nice comfortable way fer you to go down. I'll fix z'e Devil's Ladder, if Duncan vill gif' me z'e t'ree t'ousan' dollars."

"Shut up, Maza! You know I wouldn't let you go down. I don't keer nothin' 'bout ye'r mis'erable carcass. But I can't afford ter hev' you killed at this stage uv ther game, 'cause I may need yer to git this hyar matter with Alma straightened out. You are an important witness."

Dan Duncan said this in a cold tone that proved he meant what he said about caring for the dwarf only because his testimony might be needed to establish Duncan's right to the woman, if legal proof could ever be used.

"Air yer goin' ter do it?" asked Bolton, looking anxiously at the wavering Si Slack.

With an effort to speak calmly, accompanied by a gulping down of what appeared to be a great fear, Si Slack said, slowly:

"I'll go down ther Devil's Ladder an' fix it fer ther rest uv ther gang if Dan Duncan will hand me three thousand dollars ez soon ez he is down."

"I'll give yer ther money ez soon ez we git back inter ther crib. Now git down ther Ladder," answered Duncan, impatiently.

The preceding dialogue passed quickly—so quickly, indeed, that Si Slack found himself saddled with the job almost before he knew it, and Mug Hinckley, behind his stump, and burrowing into the brushwood, was wondering what the Devil's Ladder could possibly be, even while Si was preparing himself for the ordeal.

The two other members of the gang, with the smooth faces and drooping mustaches, came out, and at a sign from Duncan, carefully replaced the tree that hid the mouth of the cave.

"What in thunderation is this Devil's Ladder?" muttered Mug, in a perfect agony of curiosity.

He kept his eye closely on Si Slack, as that individual tightened his belt and rolled up his shirt sleeves above the elbow.

"Is ye'r hat on firm?" asked Bolton, who, with the rest of the gang, was watching Si Slack's preparations with the air of men who realized that he was about to undertake a task in which the chances were against his ever coming forth from it alive.

"Yes, it'll do," answered Si. "If I lose it, I don't keer, 'cause I may never want er hat ag'in afore I git through with this hyar thing."

At last all preparations were completed,

and then, as his companions leaned toward him, he plunged boldly down the Devil's Ladder.

CHAPTER XI.

SILVER SAM NONPLUSSED.

When the wine bottle was discharged at the headlight in the dining-room, placing the apartment in darkness, Silver Sam was thoroughly on the alert.

He had been thinking during the ceremony between Alma Moore and Dan Duncan, and he had been thinking to good purpose.

He did not mean to allow the villain to be married to her in reality, and he knew that the ceremony would never be binding, because it was done under compulsion. Still, he was not sure that Dan would not persuade Alma that she was actually his wife, and he saw that the only sure way to save her was to get her away.

"The rascals seem to hold most of the trumps, but I think I have a little joker up my sleeve," was his muttered comment during the mock ceremony.

Alma Moore had looked at him imploringly several times, and a terrible fear that he had deserted her in her time of need would obtrude itself upon her mind, try as she would to fight it off.

"He is a man that can stand against a dozen such fellows as these if he cares to do so," she thought, "and yet he allows this odious performance to go on without taking my part."

She thrust this thought away before it was expressed almost, feeling that she was doing a great injustice to the detective, and in another instant she found that he was not taking things so quietly as she feared.

As soon as the wine bottle hit the lamp, and the two pistol shots rang out almost simultaneously, she broke away from the group and flew to the side of the room on which she knew was the curtained doorway leading to the kitchen, dragging little Aubrey with her.

The kitchen was darker than usual, because the lamp was turned down, but was not altogether without light.

In the gloom she saw that Bob Plympton and his wife rushed to the middle of the floor and busied themselves with something, but what she could not tell exactly.

The bustle was going on in the other room, for she could make out that there was still some noise in there, when suddenly Silver Sam spoke in her ear:

"Come with me, and come quickly."

Before she realized what was to be done, she was half-helped, half-pushed down some steps below the floor, and with a crash the trap-door fell, and a cold wave of air made her shiver.

For a moment she stood still, with the warm hand of her boy clasped in hers, uncertain what to do.

"Now, Alma, this is our salvation. There is not a moment to be lost," whispered the detective, as he seized her other hand and dragged her along into the darkness.

"Where are we going?"

"To safety, I hope, and believe," he answered, fervently.

He dragged her forward with a force that was almost brutal in his anxiety to get her to safety, and the ring on her finger was ground into her flesh.

Although she was so much hurt, she would not cry, for she understood that it was only the result of his enthusiasm in her behalf that made him hold her so tightly.

"Oh, if we can only get away from this dreadful place, I will never come into California again," she exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, you will! California is a lovely place, and it is altogether too good to leave to such a set of blackguards as the Red Bluff gang," was the cheerful response of the detective.

The little lad did not speak. He knew that he was with his mother and a man who was her good friend, and that contented him. Young as he was, he had experiences that made him older in his mind than his body, and he was wise enough to resign himself to the guidance of those whom he knew to be his friends.

There was nothing more said for a time. The detective knew that the gang would be after them in a few minutes, and that there was no time to lose.

Bob Plympton had promised him as he closed the trap that he would detain the gang as long as he could, so that the fugitives should have a chance to get a good start, but Silver Sam knew that this relief would be only temporary, and that unless he put a good gap between himself and the trap-door he and his charges would never get away.

After walking quickly for a few hundred feet, a door was encountered. The woman shuddered as she ran against it in the dark, for she felt that all hope must indeed be abandoned.

Silver Sam was not so easily discouraged, however, for he put his shoulder against it, and, with a hearty push, forced it wide open. As he did so, a faint glimmer of daylight, for which it was not easy to account, shone upon a brass knob on the door, in one tiny point of light, and he knew that he was on the right track.

"Steady!" he called out, as he saw that they were at the head of a long flight of stairs.

"We might have fallen down there, mightn't we?" said Alma, with a shudder.

"Well, we should not go marching about a place that does not belong to us," laughed Silver Sam, as he led the two down the stairs, feeling the rocky wall with his right hand as he did so, to guide himself.

"Where are we going, mamma?" asked Aubrey.

"To safety, I believe, my dear."

"Yes, that is where we are going, Aubrey, and you must do just as you are told, so that we can be sure to get there," added Silver Sam.

"I will," answered the boy, simply, and Silver Sam knew that the child could be depended upon.

At the foot of the stairs there was another long passageway, and then another door like the last through which they had passed. This door was partly open, and without hesitation Silver Sam pushed it open wide, and found, as he had expected, another stairway.

The three had just reached the foot, when they heard, as if just behind them, the voices of Dan Duncan and Lionel Bolton.

"They have got too far away, I guess," said Duncan's voice.

"I'm thinkin' you're right, Dan," answered Lionel Bolton. "We may as well go back, and tackle them some other way."

Then the voices ceased, and after a few moments of indescribable bustle, that seemed to be very near, the sounds ceased, and Silver Sam, who had stopped involuntarily, with Alma and her boy clinging to him, pushed on at a good speed.

"Are they close to us?" whispered Alma.

The detective laughed.

"No. That was a peculiar illusion. Did you ever hear of a whispering gallery? There is one in the Capitol Building at Washington."

"Oh, yes, I know," responded Alma, with a relieved sigh. "A man stands at one side of an immense hall, and whispers softly, and persons standing at the other side, a long way off, hear all he says."

"Right to a dot," answered the detective. "Well, that is the way it is here. Dan Duncan and that scoundrel Bolton were standing in the passageway, just under the trap that comes from the kitchen, and the voices were carried along the narrow space, so that they seemed to be close to us."

At this point the detective found himself somewhat in a quandary. It was a simple thing. Just two paths running off in different directions, and the question was which one to take.

Silver Sam knew that their safety depended upon their taking the right one. He was convinced that if he took the wrong one it would lead them further into the recesses of the cavern, but that, on the other hand, the right one would take them out to the open air.

"I don't know what to do," he muttered. "If I'd ever been down here before, I should know, no matter how many twists and turns there might be. But I can't tell anything about it now."

"What did you say?" asked Alma, anxiously.

"Nothing."

He answered her rather shortly, for his quick ear detected footsteps near them.

"Alma," he whispered.

"Yes."

"Have you a pistol in your pocket?"

"It is in my hand."

"Good!"

He spoke heartily, for he felt a great admiration for the plucky woman, and again he felt that he could depend upon his companion if it came to a pinch.

He drew a pistol from his own pocket, and was ready to give a cold bullet to the first enemy that came within range.

At his behest, the three stood close to the rocky wall, and he and Alma strained their eyes in the direction from which they had come.

"You take the first one, and shoot low. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then I'll take the next. If there are more than two of them, we must both blaze away as long as we can, until we either escape or are shot down."

The woman did not answer, but he could just distinguish her standing resolutely by his side, with her pistol poised ready for business, and he did not trouble any further about her.

Nearer and nearer came the footsteps, and now it seemed as if the strangers did not care whether they made a noise or not. Alma Moore felt her heart beating a little quicker, and Aubrey clung tightly to his mother's skirts.

"Ready?" whispered Silver Sam.

"Quite."

"Aim low."

"I will."

In another second a shot would have rung through the hallways, and somebody would have been hurt, but a voice that both recognized with a strong feeling of relief burst upon their hearing.

"Allo! Is that you, Samuel?"

It was Bob Plympton.

"Why, Bob!" said Silver Sam, coming forth from the wall and taking the hand of the Britisher with hearty good-will.

"Yes, 'ere I am. You didn't think as I'll wuz a-goin' ter let you git away by yer-selves, did yer? W'y, s'elp me, I'd fight the 'ole bloomin' lot o' them, and heat them arterward, without salt. I would. s'elp me!"

Bob Plympton sparred at an imaginary foe, and in swinging his arm around, brought the back of his hand smartly against the cheek of some one behind him.

"Ho! Yer stoopid! W'ot are yer doin'? I'd 'it yer back wi' a cloomp on the kisser if yer wasn't me 'usband!"

"Why, Betsy, is that you?" asked the detective, laughing, in spite of the danger of their position.

"Me? In course it's me. Did yer think as I'd be left ahint? Not if Betsy Plympton knows 'erself. We're a-goin' ter git out o' 'ere with yer, an' I s'pose we'll 'ave a good time gittin' out, too."

Betsy talked as if she did not know exactly what she was saying, as was indeed the case, for she was trying to pierce the gloom behind her, and was talking really at random.

The detective was glad to know that his friends were with him, especially when he saw, by straining his vision that the cook and his wife each had a revolver in hand ready for use.

The whole party moved forward, until at last a faint glimmer of light told them that they were near the opening that led out to the open air.

In another five minutes Silver Sam darted forward and pulled a quantity of brushwood away from the exit, prepared to step out to the freedom for which he had been striving since the trap was shut down on him, with Alma Moore and her boy.

"Ow is it?" asked Bob Plympton, close on the heels of the detective.

Silver Sam looked out, and then, with a ring of something like despair in his tone, he exclaimed:

"We are trapped again!"

"Trapped?" repeated Alma.

"Wot d'yer mean?" asked Betsy.

For answer, Silver Sam pointed straight down from the opening, and his companions saw that, by one of those mighty convulsions common in the great West, a mass of rock weighing thousands of tons, had split from the wall of the canyon, so that the opening from the cave, that was originally on a gentle slope, was now a hundred feet above the bed of the canyon.

CHAPTER XII. ARE THEY SAFE?

"Well, hif that hain't the cussedest, most baggravatin' thing as hever I seed!" broke from Mrs. Plympton, as, with Alma Moore clinging to her arm, and holding her boy tightly by the hand, she looked out and realized what a serious fix they were in.

"Hit's the rains," sententiously observed Bob Plympton.

"As hif hany one couldn't see that," commented Mrs. Plympton, under her breath, for she could see that her husband's temper had been ruffled by this misfortune, and that it wouldn't be safe to go too far with him at this juncture.

"What shall we do?" burst from the pale lips of Alma Moore.

"Do, mum?" repeated Bob Plympton. "Hi'll show you wot-we'll do. We'll jist climb down the jagged p'int of the rocks and land hourselves at the bottom as right as ninepence. That's wot we'll do."

Sticking his pistol in his belt, and pressing his old soft hat firmly over his eyes, Bob began to show his companions what he meant by letting himself slip gently over the edge of the precipice that had been formed by the breaking of the rock just outside the doorway—if it can be so called—and tried to find some resting-place, however small, for the sole of his foot.

The rock was as smooth as glass all over its face for at least twenty feet down!

Plympton pulled himself back with a chagrined expression that made the detective laugh again, for Silver Sam enjoyed the good-natured Cockney cook exceedingly.

"What do you think we shall do, Bob?" he asked.

Bob Plympton took off his hat so that he could scratch his head with more convenience, as he answered:

"Blow me tight if I know. Hit's the most orkard bit o' business as I hever tried. Hif looks to me as if there warn't no way ter git over 'ere without jumping into the bloomin' gorge. I wonder if it 'ud 'urt ter go down ter the bottom of this 'ere canyon."

"It's a hundred feet," observed the detective, quietly.

"More'n a 'undred," said Betsy, who had been looking down at the bottom of the gorge, where a good-sized torrent was tumbling along in place of the rivulet that was usually there, as a result of the rain that had been at least partly responsible for the breaking off of the great mass of rock.

"No one could jump down there and live, of course," remarked Alma Moore. "But what are we to do?"

She betrayed no excitement as she put this question, for she had the utmost confidence in Silver Sam, and though it appeared now as if they had reached a point where it would be impossible to go further, she was sure that he would find some way to relieve them of their difficulty in good time.

"It's a bad case," mused the detective, as he looked down, with a thoughtful eye to the bottom of the chasm. "I had calculated on walking away quietly from here as soon as I reached the opening, because I knew the gang could not get around to this spot from the cave, for at least half an hour after we had gone."

"That was right, too," declared Bob Plympton, with an approving nod. "But who'd 'a' thought as there was any sich bloomin' trouble as this 'ere ter upset hall calculations. It's mean, that's wot it is."

"What do you suggest?" asked the detective.

"I hain't got nothin' to suggest," answered Bob.

"In course 'e hain't," interposed Betsy, who had become bolder, now that she saw her lord and master in doubt. "E hain't never got no hideas, less Hi give 'em to 'im."

"Shut up, woman!" thundered Bob.

"I hain't a woman, an' I won't shut hup!" answered Betsy, defiantly. "Wot Hi says is as you can't think o' nothink unless Hi tells yer. Hi may be a woman, but Hi'm better'n a man, hany day in the week."

Silver Sam always enjoyed these conubial scuffles between Bob and Betsy Plympton, and if the situation had not demanded prompt action, he would have allowed them to fight it out at their leisure, even if they had got to fisticuffs, as they did sometimes in the heat of argument.

But this was a serious moment, and he felt called upon to bring Mrs. Plympton to the point. So he asked her, somewhat sternly:

"What is your idea, Mrs. Plympton?"

Silver Sam generally called her Betsy, and she knew he was much in earnest when he said "Mrs. Plympton," so she answered, without hesitation:

"W'y, we've hall got to go back. That's hall."

The detective whistled softly.

"What a blamed fool I've been!"

"Why?" asked Alma.

"Not to have seen that before."

"But the gang?"

"They are all outside by this time, trying to head me off."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Yes, the young 'un is right," put in Bob Plympton. "They wos all starting hout w'en I follered yer into the cellar, an' I'll bet a p'und there hain't any of the 'ole bloomin' lot in the cave now. We can jist go hup there, an' take heverything they've got. So come along."

He seized the hand of Alma Moore as he spoke, and began to drag her back into the darkness of the long passageway.

"Stop!" cried Alma, as she pulled her hand away. "What do you say, Silver Sam?"

"The same as Bob Plympton, of course. It's common-sense."

"Hof course it his," added Bob, smirking.

"Yes, but it hain't ye'r hown. Hi'm ther man as thought o' that," declared Betsy, placing her hands on her hips and looking at her husband contemptuously.

"Look 'ere! You 'ook it, will yer? 'Ook it!"

"I won't 'ook it, Bob Plympton."

"Yes, yer will."

"No, I won't!"

"Never mind, Bob," interposed the detective, with a smile. "You should always give the ladies due credit, and I must say that I thought it was Betsy's idea."

Bob Plympton did not answer, and as it was rather dark, he did not see the triumphant grin on his wife's face, although he had no doubt that it was there.

Without another word the detective, with Alma's hand in his, who, in turn, was holding that of her boy, walked rapidly back into the darkness.

The party had almost reached the spot under the trap-door in the kitchen floor, when, with an exclamation of surprise, Silver Sam dropped upon the floor and grappled with something that he had stumbled against, and that he knew at once was a man.

His strong fingers closed around the throat of a man, whoever he was, and a gurgle told that the stranger was completely at the mercy of the muscular detective.

No one interfered. It was pitch dark at this spot, and although they all realized that a hidden foe had sprung up into their path, they were satisfied that Silver Sam was equal to him alone.

Alma, Bob, and Betsy each had a revolver ready for business, but it was too dark to use it, even if it had been necessary, when the detective and his antago-

nist were rolling over each other in close embrace.

"Oh! Lettee me go, and I tellee you allee 'bout it!" gasped the stranger.

"Lo Shun, as sure as hegg's is hegg's!" exclaimed Bob, in amazement. "Kill him, Sam! Let's get heven with the bloomin' Chinaman, any'ow!"

"No; don'tee killee me. I good Chinaman!"

"Yes, you hare—a very good Chinaman," retorted Betsy, with bitter irony. "You mean, yaller rascal!"

Silver Sam lifted Lo Shun to his feet and dexterously pulled a knife from the folds of his dress at the same moment.

It was lucky that he did, for the first movement of the Chinaman when the detective released him was to feel for the knife, with the amiable intention of stabbing some one then and there.

Silver Sam knew what he was doing, but, as the fellow had no other weapon, it did not make any particular difference.

"Who is up-stairs?" he asked, sternly.

"I notee know."

"What were you doing down here? Who sent you?"

"Me comee allee samee myself. Me wantee to helpee Misssee Moore. Me likee her and the leetle boy. So me come down to see whatee you all do."

"What were you doing with that knife?"

"Me notee have the knife. You takee it away."

It was useless to waste time with the Chinaman, who was as cunning as men of his race generally are, and the detective made up his mind to use him now that he was there, and he put his plan into execution at once.

"Go up that ladder and push the trap-door open," he commanded, keeping his hand on Lo Shun's arm, so that he could make sure that he was not playing any slippery trick in the dark.

"Me afraid."

"Why?"

"When me putee my head up there, if any of the gang there, they shootee me before they see who it is."

"Ho, the rascal! 'E knows that some of them bloomin' scoundrels are hup there, don't you see," put in Betsy.

"No, me notee know," insisted the Chinaman. "Me thinkee they are all outside, but if they comee in again, me get it in the neck."

Silver Sam stopped all further parley by pushing the Chinaman to the foot of the ladder, threatening him if he did not go up at once, and Lo Shun obeyed without saying anything more.

But it happened that the kitchen really was empty, and as soon as the Chinaman had pushed his head well above the floor and the detective had glanced around the room by the light of the locomotive headlight, he pulled the Chinaman down, and helped Alma Moore and the boy to ascend.

When the whole party were in the kitchen, with their pistols in their hands, Lo Shun attempted to follow.

"No, yer don't. You stays down there. We don't want you," said Bob, looking inquiringly at the detective.

A sign from Silver Sam was quickly obeyed, and Bob pushed the Chinaman down the stairs and closed the trap over him, fastening it down and replacing the oilcloth.

Then Silver Sam walked boldly outside, pushing away the tree and replacing it as before.

As he had felt sure would be the case, none of the gang were to be seen, and he had nothing in his way to prevent his taking Alma Moore and her boy away from the spot that had so nearly proved to be the death-house of Silver Sam.

"Hello, Sam!"

The detective turned quickly, with his weapon in his hand.

"Don't shoot, Sam. It's only me—Mug Hineckley," added that gentleman, as he came from the shrubbery and tree that had hidden him while the gang were discussing ways and means with regard to the Devil's Ladder.

"Where did you come from?"

"Been snoopin' around hyar, watchin'."

them fellers, an' it's a mighty good thing yer didn't come out afore, fer they've only jist got away," answered Mug. "They've gone down thet thar' gulch in er way ez I wouldn't want ter, an' I hope they'll break their necks altogether."

Silver Sam was not sure that Mug Hinckley could be depended on, and he looked at him a moment as if he wondered whether he was sincere. But Alma Moore, with a woman's tact, saw that the momentary suspicion of the detective hurt the feelings of the other, rough miner as he was, and she hastened to remove the strain by taking the hand of Mug Hinckley and shaking it warmly.

"I'm glad ez yer believes in me, marm," said Mug. "I know I ain't the sort uv man ez gits much credit fer anything he does, an' mebbe rightly, too. But I'm squar' in this hyar thing, ez sure ez I'm standin' hyar."

Meanwhile Bob Plympton had not been idle. He cared nothing about the gang so long as they were not around, and he knew that as they had used the Devil's Ladder to go below, they could not return without going a long way around.

He brought forth the stallion that had been through so much work in one way and another the night before, together with the brown thoroughbred mare that the dwarf had ridden. These were already caparisoned, with the quirt hanging at the saddle-bow.

Without comment or inquiry, the detective assisted Alma Moore to the back of the brown mare, which he had noticed was equipped with a lady's saddle.

Bob had disappeared to the stable again, and soon came forth with three other horses.

"Betsy, you'll 'ave to ride on a reg'lar man's saddle," he said, to his wife.

"Indeed, will I? Well, I won't. If I wuz dressed fur it, I'd do it quick enough."

"Git dressed fer it. We'll wait fer yer," responded her husband, impatiently.

Betsy Plympton did not argue. She ran into the cave again, and, in an almost incredibly short time, came forth again in the clothes of a miner, and looking like a very nice-looking lad of about eighteen.

"The old woman is a good-looking do-nah, I tell yer," observed Bob, with a proud glance at his wife. "She can ride, too, and shoot, as well. I'd rather 'ave'er in that costoom than in them bloomin' petticoats w'ot's always in the way."

The whole party mounted. Betsy rode astride, and handled her horse with the ease of a cowboy. The detective took Aubrey on his saddle in front of him, and the whole party rode down the ravine in single file, with the detective in the lead.

It was a lovely day, and the sun shining high in the heavens proclaimed that it was noon.

The descent down the rocky path was dangerous, but the sure-footed animals they rode avoided all the dangerous spots by instinct, and in an hour they were all down on the road in the main canyon, and galloping rapidly in the direction of Tahoe, which was Silver Sam's objective point.

"We are safe now?" asked Alma Moore, after they had traveled several miles and were well on their way to Tahoe.

"I think so," answered Silver Sam, with a smile at the boy, who was dozing, with his head nestling in the detective's arms.

"In course you're safe now," put in Mug Hinckley. "This hyar road is well traveled, an' ther gang wouldn't dare ter do nothin', even if they wuz ter meet yer."

Mug spoke in a loud tone, as he always did, so that if there had been any one in the neighborhood his words must have been overheard.

As the party passed on, a dark, fierce face, belonging to a large head, peeped from behind a huge boulder. It was the face of Maza, the dwarf.

"Safe, eh? Vell, ve see about z'at when you git to Tahoe! Safe? Ha, ha! I don't know! I tink I get me my t'ousand tollars yet!"

Then he disappeared again behind the rocks, and Alma Moore rode close to the detective's horse, so that she could stroke the face of her sleeping boy.

"How thankful I am to you, Sam, for

what you have done this day," she murmured. "I hope I shall never see Dan Duncan or that terrible dwarf again."

"I don't think you will," answered Silver Sam.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DEVIL'S LADDER.

When Si Slack plunged down the Devil's Ladder, his act was one calculated to make any one nervous.

The plunge was nothing less than a head-long dive over the edge of the precipice, apparently into the depths that were too awful to contemplate without dizziness.

Evidently, the descent of the Devil's Ladder was a feat that demanded unusual pluck, as well as agility, and if Si Slack accomplished it, no one could accuse him of either cowardice or lack of athletic ability.

When he went over the edge, Mug Hinckley, who was intently watching the proceedings, thought that the end of Si Slack's career had come.

Then he saw that a rope, attached to a stake driven firmly into the ground, was hanging over the precipice, and he knew that Si had not gone over without some support.

"What in thunder made the feller go over head first, I wonder?" muttered Mug.

Here is the explanation: The rope, which was about a hundred feet long, hung over the awful chasm without any connection with the bottom of the gorge, so far as could be seen at a casual glance. As a matter of fact, the lower end of the line was only the beginning of the Devil's Ladder itself.

In one of the crevices of the rocks was hidden the end of a long rope made of a tough creeping vine, that had probably been placed there by Indians, many years ago. What was the nature of the plant no one in the Red Bluff gang knew, but they did know that it was long enough, when turned loose, to reach to the bottom of the canyon, and that it had knots and lumps in it that would enable any ordinarily active man to climb down without particular danger.

To get this vine out so that the rest of the gang could go down was the feat that called for the most pluck, because, if the vine should not happen to be there, it would be impossible for the man that had gone down the rope to get back, owing to the peculiarly overhanging shape of the precipice.

As soon as Si Slack went over the brow of the cliff, clinging to the rope, the reason for his doing it upside down was evident to those that were looking over the edge.

The rope swung backward and forward, with the weight of the man, he having given it a good hard push outward when he threw himself over.

As the rope swung inward, Si reached out and caught a small tree growing in a cleft of the rock. Then he pulled himself in close to the face of the rock, out of sight of the men above.

If he had allowed himself to slide down feet first, his chances of catching this tree with his hands would have been much less than as it was, with his hands outstretched ready to take it, before the rope had time to swing outward again.

As he caught the tree, he held himself steady for a moment, and looked eagerly for the vine.

The gloom was so deep that it took him perhaps a minute to accustom his eyes to it, as he strove to pierce with his vision the mass of tangled grass and rocks that faced him.

He knew that the vine would be hidden partly by the rubbish, but that one end of it should protrude.

The rope upon which he hung, upside down, swayed slightly as, in his eagerness to see where the vine was, he shook it convulsively, and once he nearly let go of the tree. Had he done so, he must have been pulled up again, so as to give himself a good push when he jumped over the edge of the precipice.

"Holy smoke! It ain't thar'!"

He had pulled himself inward so far that he could poke about among the grass

and rocks with his bowie-knife, but not a sign of the vine was to be found.

"If this hyar ain't er pretty kittle uv fish!" he growled. "Them thar' fellers above won't believe ez I looked fer ther cussed thing, an' I'd sooner take er lickin' from er jack-rabbit than go up thar' an' face Dan Duncan. I've allers been on-lucky, an' it seems ter me ez I'm gittin' it in ther neck lately more'n ever."

"Hello! Down thar'!" yelled Duncan. "Whar' ther deuce are yer?"

"Oh, go ter Jersey!" muttered Si Slack, careful that Duncan should not hear him.

He was poking about for the end of the vine, but he had reached the conclusion that it had become dislodged in some way, by the rains or other natural causes, and that the gang would have to find some other way of getting down into the gulch, if they did it at all.

"An' thet will mean ther escape uv thet or'nary cus uv er Silver Sam, with Duncan's wife an' ther kid. Then there'll be er lively time fer me. Thet little Maza'll never git over it, 'cause thar's an extra thousand in it fer him. Let alone ther pile I wuz ter git from Duncan. If I wuz whar' I c'u'd do it, I'd kick myself good and hard."

As Mr. Slack was hanging to a single swinging rope, upside down, over a pit several thousand feet deep, he had all he could do to keep himself up without trying any such gymnastic tricks as kicking himself. So he was right in putting in a saving clause.

"Say, you, Si Slack, I'll come down after yer, ef yer don't hurry with thet rope," yelled Lionel Bolton.

"Come down, then," returned Si, defiantly.

"It'll be er mighty interesting time fer you if I do."

Si Slack's only answer was a laugh.

"Come up an' let some one else go down," cried Duncan.

Si Slack did not reply. Something had caught his eye that made his heart jump with satisfaction, and the next moment he had dragged out the end of a stout sapling, and was pulling it out of a cleft in the wall, hand over hand, holding on with difficulty to his rope as he did so, and panting with the exertion.

"Got it?" bawled Bolton.

"Shut ye'r tater trap," responded Slack, who could afford to be independent now that success waited upon him.

As he pushed the end of the sapling out into the view of the gang above, they said nothing more, while Si continued his operations.

As soon as he had obtained a good hold upon the sapling, and knew that he could get out of the fix he was in by its aid, he allowed himself to fall over to an upright position, and, seizing the tree before mentioned, jumped to a narrow ledge, letting the rope go at the same time.

He paid out the vine till it reached the ground, watching it carefully as he did so, inch by inch, to make sure that it was sound all the way. A weak spot would mean death to all the men who might be depending upon it at a critical moment.

At last, after a great deal of exertion, the end of the sapling reached the branches of a tree in the canyon, forming a complete ladder from the little ledge upon which he was holding himself so carefully.

By this time the men above were very impatient, for the proceeding had occupied at least half an hour.

"We won't hev' much more than enough time ter head 'em off, anyhow," growled Lionel Bolton. "Thet Si Slack is slower'n cold molasses. I wish ez I'd gone down myself."

"Wal, I'm er ghost ef I ain't let thet thar' rope go without fixin' this hyar thing," muttered Si Slack, as he pulled a long hickory pole out of the hole in which the sapling had been coiled, and looked in perplexity at the rope swinging several yards away, over the chasm.

The members of the gang were grumbling and shouting to him, but he did not respond. He was too busy in trying to repair his own oversight in letting the rope go before he had done with it.

There was a strong hook at the end of the rope, and into this, by a lucky chance, Si Slack managed to thrust, at the first attempt, the end of the pole.

"Ef I wuz ter try thet every day fer ther rest of my life, I don't believe ez I could do it," he remarked, to himself, with a grin of satisfaction. "I ought ter hev' fixed it afore I let go uv ther rope, uv course. Hows'ever, it's all right, anyhow."

The end of the pole was furnished with a long iron spike, driven into it crosswise, so that when the pole was pushed through the loop of the rope, it could not slip out. The pole then made a bridge from the rope to the shelf, but a very frail and dangerous one.

"Hello, down thar!" bawled Bolton.

"Hello, yourself!"

"Ready?"

"Yes. Come on!"

As Slack spoke, he let himself down upon the sapling, and descended rapidly by means of the knots and bumps, that made it easier for him than if it had been entirely smooth. The canyon was some two thousand feet deep, and it would be impossible for a man to go down without resting many times.

Si Slack had not gone down many feet when Lionel Bolton came sliding down the rope, and, clasping the pole firmly with his hands and legs, continued his slide till he reached the ledge.

He did not wait there, but seizing the sapling in the same way as Si Slack, went down rapidly after that worthy, who was now a long way toward the valley.

Dan Duncan was the next, and then, in quick order, came the other members of the gang.

"Now hustle and head them off!" commanded Duncan, running, as he spoke, to a certain spot in the canyon where a huge boulder hid the outlet of the cave, and where he expected to see Silver Sam and those with him issue at any moment.

It should be explained that the spot where the rock had broken off—at the end of the long passageway, described in a former chapter, and which prevented Silver Sam getting out at that point, was not the end of the secret rendezvous of the Red Bluff gang.

The place that ran up to the outlet of the cave, but which had been so decidedly changed by the fall of the rock, was in another gulch, or gorge, landlocked entirely, and from which escape could only be made by walking through another passage of tortuous direction.

It was at the outlet of this supplementary passage that Duncan took his stand.

"Go in after them, Dan," suggested Lionel Bolton.

"And offer myself ez er target fer thet feller to pop at, eh? No, captain. I'm willin' ter do my share toward gittin' ther feller, an' I hate him enough ter fight him, but I want some kind of er chance in er fight. Go in ye'rself, ef yer think it's sich er cinch."

Lionel Bolton only laughed. Then he turned to Si Slack.

"Go up thar, Si, an' fix things ag'in. We don't want no one else ter be comin' down ther Devil's Ladder. So go and put it out uv sight."

Si Slack shrugged his shoulders.

"I won't do nothin' of ther kind."

"Yer won't?"

"No."

"Then look out."

Like a flash, Bolton drew his six-shooter, and, apparently without taking aim, fired at Si Slack's head.

There was a yell from Si and a loud laugh from Duncan, who had been watching the little tussle.

Si clapped his hand to the side of his head, and when he moved his hand away again there was blood upon his fingers.

Bolton had neatly clipped off about half an inch of the tip of Si Slack's ear, as a warning to Si to be obedient.

"Now, git up thar," said Bolton, coolly, still holding his pistol, smoking, in his hand, ready to give Si another lesson if he should continue to be recalcitrant.

Si Slack did not say another word, but there was an ugly look in his eye as he climbed up into the tree, and then labor-

iously shinned up the sapling to the shelf, a long way above.

When he reached the shelf he held on by the friendly tree already described, and pulled the hanging rope to him by the pole, that still hung, with one end on the shelf and the other in the loop of the rope.

Having secured the rope firmly to the tree, he replaced the pole in its hiding place, and drew up the sapling, which he coiled away, neatly and snugly, in the hole in the rock.

This job completed, he grasped the rope firmly, loosed it from the tree, and swung out over the chasm.

It was a dangerous feat, for the least slip would have sent him headlong into the canyon.

But he did not slip. He might be a coward (although he had not shown it in his management of the Devil's Ladder), but there was no question that he was active and strong.

In a good, sailor-like fashion, he went up hand over hand until he stood on the top of the bluff, near the entrance to the cave with its big tree guarding the entrance.

He pulled up the rope, and carried it to the cave, where he threw it into a corner in the kitchen, glancing casually about him as he did so, by the light of a lantern that he found burning in the dining-room—the headlights being all out.

Si Slack's ear was sore, and he muttered a fierce oath as he put his hand to it—an oath that meant mischief for Lionel Bolton.

"I'll make him pay more for that little bit of ear than he did for the best horse he ever had. Curse him!"

"Curse him!" came echoing through the cave, in a ghostly, horrible voice, that was like nothing Si Slack had ever heard in his life.

CHAPTER XIV. MAZA'S TRIUMPH.

As has been said already, Si Slack did not enjoy the reputation of being over brave.

The imputation upon his courage may have been undeserved, but it is undeniable that he was about as badly scared a man as could be found in the whole State of California, when he heard his fierce denunciation of Lionel Bolton repeated in his ear by what he was firmly convinced was a voice from the other world.

He looked around slowly and fearfully, trying to pierce the gloom that hung over the corners of the room, beyond the circle of light from the lantern that stood on the table.

"What was it?" he whispered to himself, as his trembling hand sought his revolver.

"Curse him!" rang out the mysterious voice again, so close behind Si Slack that he stumbled against the table, and made the champagne glasses upon it ring again.

The sound of the glasses had a natural suggestion, however, and Si Slack picked up one of them and looked about for a bottle of champagne to steady his nerves.

There was always plenty of wine in the cave, and although there was no ice handy, the lower rooms of the cave were so cool that the wine was always in pleasant condition for consumption.

If Si had had to go down into the cellar, however, he would never have had any wine that day. Fortunately for him, there were two bottles on a sideboard by the side of the table within reach of his hand as he leaned against the table.

With a sigh of relief, Si Slack seized a bottle and knocked off its neck with the barrel of his heavy six-shooter. As the wine bubbled out, he poured it into a glass, and, with a desperate bravado that perhaps he did not feel, said aloud:

"Curses on all murderers!"

He raised his glass to his lips to toss off his wine, when he heard a crash at his elbow, and out went the lantern.

"Curses on all murderers!" cried the unearthly voice he had heard twice before, and then the glug-glug of liquid told him that some one was pouring out a glass of wine, and he knew that the crash he had heard was caused by some one knocking off the neck of another champagne bottle.

Si Slack trembled so that he spilled nearly all the wine from his glass.

"Allow me!" said the mysterious voice, in a mocking cadence that made Si Slack's knees shake all the more.

Before he understood what was meant, a stream of champagne came out of the darkness into his wine glass, and stopped when it was filled to the brim.

Si steadied himself with a great effort, and then another glass, the counterpart of his own, filled to the brim with champagne, appeared from the darkness and clinked against that in his hand.

"Down with it!" said the voice.

Si mechanically raised his glass to his lips and drank down his wine, smacking his lips afterward involuntarily.

Even this was repeated by his extraordinary, invisible companion, and the supernatural smack that came from the darkness suggested intense enjoyment on the part of the apparition, or whatever it was, that was causing Si Slack so much terror.

"Who—who—are you?" asked Si Slack, tremblingly, but with a little more courage than he had had before, for the wine was good.

"Take another," was the response, and again the champagne came from the darkness and filled his glass.

"Curses on all murderers!" repeated the awful voice, and again there was silence as Si Slack drank, followed by a smacking of the lips of himself and his unseen ghostly boon companion.

Si Slack put down his glass, and the wine seemed to make him bold enough to talk familiarly even with a ghost.

"Who are you?" he asked, for the second time.

The response was a ghostly "Ha, ha, ha!" that would have frozen Si's blood had it not been so well warmed up by the wine.

As it was, Si listened rather contemptuously to the laughter, regarding it as an undignified proceeding on the part of a respectable ghost.

Perhaps the mysterious one saw that his mirth did not frighten Si very much, for he stopped the noise.

"See hyar. Ef yer don't tell me who you are, and what you are doing hyar, choke me ef I don't send a bullet after yer, ef it kills me right afterward!"

As every one knows, a coward who is in a corner is bolder than the most courageous man, and there is no doubt that Si Slack would actually have blazed away into the darkness had not his mysterious companion promptly responded to his question:

"Z'at was all right, Si. Don't make one big fool of yourself."

Si recognized the voice at once, and wondered how it was that he had not known it at first.

"Maza!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You vas always frightened, Si. Vhat for you so scared at your friend, Maza?"

"Friend?" repeated Si, doubtfully.

Maza came out of the darkness and stood in the circle of light from the lantern, grinning maliciously.

He was not in a good humor, for he knew that Silver Sam and his companions had got away, and he saw that his thousand dollars was flitting further and further away from him every minute. But he laughed at Si Slack because he knew it would make him mad, and to annoy other people was meat and drink to the dwarf.

"I am your friend, Si. Why not you know z'at?"

"What's y'er game hyar?" asked Si Slack, roughly.

"Game?"

"Yes. You wuz goin' down ther Devil's Ladder in er terrible hurry erwhile ago, an' then I noticed yer didn't go down. I s'pose you wuz scared."

For a second a gleam of such intense hate flamed in the dwarf's red eyes that Si Slack retreated a step involuntarily. But it was only for a second that the look was there. Maza wanted something, and he was too smart to spoil his chance of getting anything he wanted by a display of foolish temper.

"I was not scared, Si," he said, softly. "But I knew those fellows were away, and

I did not want to go down into the canyon with the other fools."

"What do yer want me ter do?"

"To come with me, and we will run them down, my friend. Z'en you will be able to get anything you want from Dan Duncan."

"An' what will you git?"

"One t'ousan' dollars," answered the dwarf, promptly. "One t'ousan' dollars—and revenge."

There was a whispered conference, during which the dwarf looked around him in the suspicious manner characteristic of him.

Then the two drank another bottle of champagne between them in a sociable way and the dwarf led the way from the cave to the open air.

They walked a little way down the path outside, when Si remembered that he had not replaced the big tree.

As he ran back to put it in its place, he did not notice a figure that had slipped out of the cave after the two men, and that was now hiding among the brushwood that had lately served as a place of concealment for Mug Hineckley.

But when Maza and Si marched down the path again, this figure sneaked after them, keeping out of sight behind projecting rocks or trees growing at the wayside.

On they went until they reached the secret retreat of the dwarf where we have already seen that the dwarf was destined to fall foul of Silver Sam and his companions.

In a few words Maza told Si Slack of his scheme, which was to waylay the fugitives on the road and bring them once more into the power of the Red Bluff gang.

"If you ever say one word to the z'e rest of z'e gang about this place, you die, no matter how much you may try to keep away," hissed the dwarf.

Si Slack did not answer. He felt that he had taken such chances now on everything that it was not necessary to curry favor with Maza any longer.

"Ther little cuss! I believe ez I could do him up if I had ter," was Si Slack's inward comment.

In another moment Maza had taken him by a zigzag route among rocks and overhanging shrubs into a dark passage, and thence, to his immeasurable surprise, into a large apartment, that was enough to make the blood run cold in a stronger-nerved man than Si Slack.

The room was fitted up as a laboratory, with a furnace on which were crucibles, an old-fashioned alembic for distilling liquids, several glass retorts, with other apparatus suggestive of chemical experiments.

The dwarf saw that Si Slack was impressed by the fittings of the place, and it gave him a little thrill of triumph.

"What's in them bottles?" asked Si, pointing to a shelf.

"Poisons!" hissed Maza. "Poisons, that I give to people who try to play me false. Z'ere is enough poisons in these bottles to kill off z'e whole Red Bluff gang."

"Oh, whatee you say? You no killee me, eh?"

With one movement Maza and Si Slack jumped upon the speaker of these words and stretched him on the floor.

"You Chineer rascal! Where you come from?" yelled Maza. "I kill you."

"No, notee me! Killlee Si Slackee. Me get away from that bad man, Silver Samee. It notee my fault. He shutee me in the cellar, and me hear you and Si Slackee and follow you here. Sabee?"

Si Slack looked inquiringly at Maza, to see whether it was considered advisable to stop the mouth of the Chinaman in the most effective way by blowing out his brains. But Maza shook his head, and the Chinaman slowly rose to his feet.

The dwarf opened a thick, heavy door, and pointed to it.

The Chinaman stepped into a dark room and the dwarf calmly closed the door and padlocked it.

"Z'at make him safe," he chuckled.

Si Slack was lost in admiration at the coolness of the proceeding, and Lo Shun, in the room, wondered what had struck him.

"Come," said Maza to Si Slack.

Si Slack followed the dwarf toward the outer door, but Maza held up his hand for him to stop, and Slack stopped.

Maza disappeared outside, and Slack, who was under the spell of the little man's masterful way, sat down in front of the furnace on a wooden stool and waited.

For nearly half an hour there was silence, and Slack, who had noticed that the room was lighted by two locomotive lamps, like those used in the cave of the Red Bluff gang, wondered what it all meant.

Just as he had delivered himself of a long yawn, while mechanically examining his pistols, Maza rushed into the room with the boy, Aubrey, in his arms.

"One t'ousan' dollars!" he shouted, triumphantly.

CHAPTER XV.

BOLTON'S UNSEEN WATCHERS.

The scene shifts to a big gambling house at Tahoe. At that time the miners were making plenty of money, and gambling was the staple industry of every little settlement.

In these days Tahoe is a thriving town. Then it was only a stopping place for stages and a rendezvous for miners who came from the mountains for a time.

It was a month after the events narrated in the last chapter, and Silver Sam had apparently dropped his search for the boy of Alma Moore.

The game was going in the large saloon that led directly from the street, and everything was bright and gay there.

A calm, cold-mannered dealer was at the faro table, and the click of the roulette wheel a little further back was dealing out fortune and reverses.

Two members of the Red Bluff gang were standing at the bar, talking and drinking, but there was nothing in their manner to indicate that they were desperadoes, and if the miners and others who were at the table knew who they were, no one made any sign.

"Allo, you fellers, don't make sich a noise over ye'r cards, or I'm blowed if I won't shut the place," shouted the man behind the bar, as a burst of laughter from two of the miners over the ill-luck of a third man shook the room.

"Give us er rest, Bob. W'ot air yer talkin' about, like er fool?" asked a man with a great beard, whose rough dress and spurs on his big boots proclaimed him to be a horseman—perhaps a cowboy from a neighboring ranch.

The barkeeper turned quickly, with a fierce frown, at hearing himself addressed in this familiar manner by a stranger, and his hand involuntarily flew to his pistol on his hip.

The two members of the gang became interested in a moment at the prospect of a fight, but the rough-bearded stranger only clicked his spurs together and laughed, as he laid his hand flat on the bar and turned it over with a jerk.

The movement of his hand made a heavy seal ring on his little finger click against the counter, and the barkeeper jumped back as if he had been hit with a club.

"I hain't a fool, blow me! But Hi'm a bloomin' hidiot in some things," he muttered.

While the two Red Bluff men looked from one to the other in astonishment the barkeeper shouted:

"Every one take a drink with the house!"

The men at the tables who were interested in their game did not respond. But the two members of the Red Bluff gang and several miners who had been merely watching the game, stepped up to the bar, ready for anything in the way of liquids that might be offered free.

"Give me some seltzer water," said the bearded stranger.

There was a movement among the miners, and they looked with decided disfavor at the stranger. But the barkeeper gave him what he asked for, and the miners drank their fiery whisky without comment.

"This 'ere's a hold friend o' mine, gentlemen. Which 'is name is Wallace."

"And this hyar guy behind ther bar is an old pard o' mine, and his name is Bob Plympton," responded the bearded stranger, with a smile, as he gave his hand to our old friend, who was formerly chef for the Red Bluff gang.

"Yer don't need ter tell us who Bob Plympton is," observed one of the two Red Bluff men. "But I'm glad ter know ez your name is Wallace. I thought at first ez yer wuz er man ez we used ter know ez—"

"Shut up!" yelled Bob Plympton, fiercely. "I don't want hany friends o' mine hinsulted. D'yer 'ear?"

The man who had been pulled up short looked wonderingly at Bob, for the good-natured Englishman was not in the habit of showing ill-temper.

"Thet's all right, Bob. I didn't mean no harm. I wuz only goin' to say ez—"

"Don't say hit," interrupted Bob. "Hi told yer once."

"My name is Wallace," said the bearded stranger, calmly. "Samuel Wallace. Thet's the name I hed when I wuz er kid, an' I 'low ez it's plenty good enough fer me now."

"In course. I ain't got nothin' ter say ag'in' it," said the Red Bluff man. "My name is Si Slack, and this hyar gentleman with me is Lionel Bolton. We are in the jewelry business."

"I know it," answered Wallace. "Business good?"

"Not specially."

"Wal, now, gentlemen, I hev' somethin' ter propose."

"Go ahead. You hev' ther advantage of us," observed Lionel Bolton.

"I know it," put in Wallace, with a smile.

"Yes, you hev' ther advantage of us in one way, but not in another. We heerd ez you wuz comin', an' we air hyar jist ter meet yer. We onderstand ez you air in our line."

"Jewelry?" asked the stranger, with a slight smile.

"Jewelry."

"You are right. I am in your business. Now, what is your proposition?"

"We can't talk hyar," said Slack, looking at the crowd at the tables. "This hyar is mighty pertickler b'izness."

"Whar' kin we go, then?" asked Wallace. "Mebbe my friend, Bob Plympton, will help us out."

"Hof course I will. Where would you like to go, Mr. Wallace—to the picter room?"

"Yes; that will do."

"Betsy!" screamed Bob Plympton, without moving from his position behind the bar, and with a perfectly straight face.

"Allo! W'ot's the matter?" came in a woman's tones from a door that opened behind the bar, to the left of Bob, and facing the man who had called himself Wallace.

"Come out here, Betsy, and show these 'ere gentlemen to the picter room. It's hall right. 'Urry up!"

Betsy Plympton, wholesome and ruddy as usual, stepped outside, looked carelessly at the three men, and then, with a jerk of her head toward the doorway from which she had emerged, retreated, and allowed them to follow.

"Arter you," said Si Slack, with gruff politeness to the stranger.

"Couldn't think of it. After you," was the response of Wallace.

Lionel Bolton, evidently with little patience for these courtesies, stalked through the doorway, and Si Slack trotted after him.

Then Wallace leaned hastily across the bar, and whispered:

"How is it, Bob? Safe?"

"Quite safe."

"Do you think Maza will come?"

"Can't tell. Them blokes is hawfully foxy. But I've got Mug Hineckley workin' on the game, an' 'e's hall right."

"Where's Alma?"

"She's in the house. Betsy is a-takin' care o' 'er."

"W'ot air yer waitin' fer. Mr. Wallace?" asked Lionel Bolton, suddenly appearing

in the doorway and looking around suspiciously.

"Bob Plympton is an old friend o' mine, an' we wuz jist comparin' notes," answered Wallace.

Wallace followed Bolton, and closed the door after him, and then Bob Plympton rapped on the bar with his knuckles.

It was evidently a signal, for Lo Shun, the Chinaman, came from behind a screen at the side of the bar and slid noiselessly toward Bob.

"Whatee you wantee, eh?"

"Go after them fellers, an' 'ear all ez they 'as ter say, but mind they don't know you are listening."

"Allee rightee."

The Chinaman went through the same doorway, and up the stairs on the other side.

Bob Plympton lighted a clay pipe and pulled at it slowly and gravely, keeping his eye on the players and seeing everything that went on in the big room at the same time.

Since he had left the employ of the Red Bluff gang he had managed to obtain possession of this place, by paying out most of the savings of years, and he had a snug, and, as viewed by the community in which he lived, a perfectly legitimate business.

What scheme was on foot now, in which Mug Hineckley and the Chinaman were interested, must be developed as events take place. Whatever it was, Bob Plympton was evidently giving it grave consideration, for he did not move for at least ten minutes, as he smoked on, with a very sober face.

Lionel Bolton and Si Slack went up the flight of stairs that faced them when they went through the doorway, and found a door at the top of the stairway wide open, with two lamps burning, and a general air of comfort in the room.

Why it was called the "picture room" was apparent at a glance. On all four walls, as well as on the ceiling, were tacked playing cards, making a full lining for the apartment. The cards were not arranged in regular order, by suits or otherwise, but had evidently been nailed up just as they came to hand.

The furniture in the apartment consisted of half a dozen serviceable cane-seated chairs, large round card table, and a big ice-chest.

"Sit down, gentlemen," said Wallace, as he entered the room with the air of one thoroughly at home.

The three men took seats at the table, and Wallace waited for Lionel Bolton to speak.

"Kin you give the password?" asked Bolton.

"I kin."

"Give it."

"Not much. Suppose you ain't squar', whar' would I be, after givin' away part of ther sign?" asked Wallace, evincing a little suspicion for the first time.

"Thar' wouldn't be any danger, 'cause I'd hev' ter give yer ther other end of it, an' if I couldn't do it, I would give myself away, wouldn't I?"

"Don't make no difference. I won't give it."

Lionel Bolton leaned across the table and slapped Wallace on the back with affected heartiness, although there was a spiteful glint in his eye that suggested how glad he would have been to hit him with a club instead.

"You air all right, Wallace. You're ther kind o' man ez we want. These hyar fellers ez gives everything away ain't no use ter any scheme. I wuz jist er-tryin' yer. 'Thet's all."

Lionel Bolton seized Wallace's hand in an iron grip and gave it a peculiar squeeze. To his surprise the grip he got in return was harder than his own, although the hand of the stranger was singularly white and soft, considering his general appearance.

"'Thet's all right. Yer hev' ther grip sure enough," observed Bolton, with a grin. "But I didn't know ez you wuz goin' ter smash all my knuckles over it."

"'Thet's part of the grip," answered Wallace, smiling.

"We are quite alone, of course? Because this hyar is where I gives away ther scheme," remarked Bolton.

He went all around the room, and was pleased to see that there were only two doors to the room. One of them was that by which they had entered, and the other led into a bedroom, which had no other outlet.

He satisfied himself that there was no one in the bedroom and no one in the hallway outside the door by which they had come in. Then he sat down, with a contented expression on his face.

He did not know that he was covered by the muzzles of three six-shooters in the hands of persons who never missed their aim!

CHAPTER XVI.

A DOUBLE-EDGED PLOT.

"Now, what is ther scheme?" asked Wallace.

"Jist this: You hev' heard of Alma Moore?"

Wallace started.

"Oh, I see yer hev', an' you're afraid she's somewhar' around here. Wal, yer needn't git any sich idea ez thet in yer head, 'cause she's far enough away from hyar ter-night."

"Whar' is she?" asked Wallace, quietly.

"Why, she's in Sacramento, or Chicago, or some other place. It don't make much difference. She ain't hyar, anyhow."

"Glad ter know thet."

"How's ever, don't interrupt me, or we'll never git through ter-night."

"Why don't yer drive ahead then?" put in Si Slack. "You keep on interrupting yerself, seems ter me."

"Seems ter you? You're a chump," replied Bolton, contemptuously. Then he went on, speaking to Wallace: "Thar's er feller around these hyar parts named Dan Duncan. He used ter belong ter ther gang—"

"What gang?" asked Wallace, innocently, as the other stopped himself suddenly.

"Oh, tell him, Lionel. Ther Red Bluff gang, ther same ez we all belong ter. You know ez well ez we do," interrupted Si Slack, impatiently.

"Oh, ther Red Bluff gang, eh? Wal, go on."

Wallace spoke calmly, but there was a ring of triumph in his voice that would probably have been noticed by any other people that might have heard it, had such been present.

"Now, this Dan Duncan," continued Lionel, speaking quickly, "wuz after this hyar Alma Moore. He made er bluff at marryin' her about er month ago—did it with er mock ceremony, yer know, in the gang's crib up in ther mountains—an' then he lost her."

"Lost her—how?"

"Why, thet sneaking Silver Sam, ther detective, what is always er goin' 'round interferin' with legitimate business. He got it inter his head ez we hedn't no right ter take her kid away from her, and he chased hisself right inter ther crib, an' ac-tooally took Alma away from under ther very nose of Dan Duncan. It wuz er nerry thing ter do, for Dan wuz plum set on rubbin' him out, an' it's er wonder he didn't do it when he hed ther chance. Wal, this hyar Silver Sam, ez they calls him, he knocked out ther lights in ther crib with something or other, an' took ther woman, with her kid, an' got away."

"Whar' did he go?"

"Down in ther cellar. He chased through thar', and Dan Duncan and me, we thought ez we would catch him outside. So we let him go ahead through ther cellar, an' we slid down ther Devil's Ladder—"

"Ther what?" interrupted Wallace.

"Ther Devil's Ladder. It's er way ez we hev' fer gittin' ter ther lower level in er hurry. We thought we hed him dead ter rights, but there hed been er landslide, and this hyar Silver Sam hed gone back, so thet while we wuz er pokin' about below, burn me ef he wuzn't all right up top."

"Did he get away?"

"Kinder. Thar' wuz him, and—listen, quietly, because it wouldn't do fer this

part ter git out—and Bob Plympton, downstairs. Bob thinks we don't know thet he stood in with Silver Sam, and we don't want him ter know ez we know it, 'cause it might be awkward, now thet he is keepin' this place. We uses it ez er rendervoo, you know."

"I see," said Wallace, yawning. "But say, how much longer is this hyar yarn?"

"Not much longer. Hyar is ther business ter be done. Dan Duncan hez ther kid. He give Maza a thousand dollars fer him, an' I don't know what he means ter do with him. Kill him, maybe. Why—wha—what air yer doin'?" he cried, as Wallace sprang at his throat with an oath.

Wallace had placed his hands on Lionel's neck with a fierce grip, but he did not tighten his fingers. He only gave Lionel's chin a slap with his finger, laughing as he did so, but keeping his eye on the hand of Lionel that had flown toward his pistol.

"Excuse me, pardner! I saw one o' them spiders on yer chin, an' it wuz necessary to knock it off quickly. They're p'izen, yer know."

"Wal, I s'pose they air, but it's not er safe thing ter do, Wallace. I hev' er way of shootin' mighty quick, an' I wouldn't want ter kill one o' my friends by mistake."

"I wouldn't, either," observed Wallace, rather significantly.

"Wal, ez I wuz sayin', Dan Duncan hez this hyar kid, an' I dun'no' what he may do with him, but I do know ez he will be in this hyar house ter-night on his way through ter Chicago."

"Chicago?"

"Yes. He's goin' thar', 'cause he hez an idea ez Alma Moore is thar', an' he wants ter make some dicker with her 'bout givin' up ther boy and gittin' her back. Yer see, he's dead stuck on thet thar' woman, and he'd do anything ter hev' her acknowledge him as her husband."

"Go on."

"Wal, ther p'int is this. When he comes inter this hyar house we hev' ter see ez he never leaves it."

"What fer?"

"Say, Wallace, they told me ez you wuz one of ther right kind, an' thet we could depend upon you. An' now you ask why we want ter stop ther wind o' Dan Duncan. What's ther matter with you?"

"He's jokin'. Can't yer see through anything?" put in Si Slack, who had been silent for the last five minutes or so, but who had been watching the face of Wallace with the greatest attention.

"Thet's what. I'm only jokin'," acquiesced Wallace. "What's yer plan?"

Lionel walked to the two doors again, and opened each one, to look into the hallway and into the empty bedroom. When he came back he put his mouth close to Wallace's ear and whispered.

Wallace nodded intelligently.

"Is it er go?" asked Lionel.

"It's er go."

"Shake!"

Wallace put out his hand, and it was seized by Lionel Bolton and Si Slack together. Then the three hands crawled over each other in a peculiar manner, and formed a solid knot of human flesh, as it rapped against the table three times.

"Thet's all we hev' ter say, I s'pose?" asked Bolton.

"I guess thet's all," responded Wallace.

"Listen," whispered Si Slack.

All three stood quite still, for they had risen to shake hands, and then Bolton went to the door.

"It's ther coach, sure enough."

The sound of horses' hoofs in the distance that had caught Si Slack's ear came nearer and nearer, and now they could distinguish the hoarse voice of old Bill Long as he swore picturesquely at his horses while urging them up the stiff ascent that led into the main street of Tahoe.

"Whar' shall we go?" asked Wallace.

"Stay right whar' we air."

"Whar' do you s'pose Dan Duncan an' ther boy will go? Mebbe they will come inter this hyar room, an' then whar' would we be?"

"Don't be afeard. Bob Plympton will

take care o' thet. He's standin' in with us in this hyar thing, though he went back on us afore. But it wuz all through thet cussed Silver Sam. He hez er way of makin' most people do ez he sez, an' he hed Bob Plympton jist whar' he wanted him. Now Bob is dead on with us."

"Glad ter hear it," observed Wallace, quietly.

While they were talking they could hear the coach run up to the door, and then a voice came out, clear cut and sharp, in the room below, that Wallace recognized as that of Dan Duncan, the gambler.

Instinctively Wallace's hand went to his pistol, but Lionel, with a laugh, placed his hand on the other's wrist.

"Don't try ter do anything rash. Wait fer er few minutes, and you kin hev' all thet fun you want."

Even as he spoke the door of the room burst open, and Dan Duncan came into the room, holding in his arms Aubrey Moore.

He stopped as he saw the three men, and then, turning around to Bob Plympton, who had followed him in, he yelled:

"What d'yer mean by this, yer blamed skunk? Is this some of your dirty work, or not?"

He did not take the trouble to draw the pistol that could be seen peeping from beneath the skirt of his sack coat, but there was murder in his eye, nevertheless.

"Hi hain't no skunk. Hi want yer ter hunderstand that, too. These genelman are guests of my 'ouse, an' I want them treated with respect. That's the kind of a bloke Hi ham."

Dan Duncan was not listening to the remarks of Plympton. He was looking closely at Wallace, with the boy still in his arms.

"Am I to hev' this hyar room ter myself, or whar' am I ter go, with my son?" he asked, after he had taken a leisurely survey of the apartment.

"If these genelman will vacate you can 'ave the room. But hif they don't want to, Hi'll put you bin somewhere helse."

"They needn't go out. At least, these two needn't."

He pointed to Lionel Bolton and Si Slack.

"Which, I suppose, is er polite reminder thet you'd like me ter git out, eh?" asked Wallace, pleasantly.

"Precisely."

"All right. I will go."

Bob Plympton looked at Wallace in surprise, but a scarcely perceptible wink from the latter warned Bob Plympton to make no further remarks, and Wallace marched out of the room and down the stairs.

Dan Duncan stood at the door, looking down the stairs after him until he had opened the door to the bar-room and disappeared.

"See hyar, Bob, do yer know who this 'hyar Wallace is?" asked Duncan, as he returned to the room, still holding the boy, who was fast asleep.

"That genelman is a friend of mine, Mr. Duncan."

"He ain't no friend of mine."

"That don't matter, Mr. Duncan. You hain't obliged to fall on the necks of all the guests of this 'ouse, Mr. Duncan," retorted Bob Plympton, loftily, as he bounced out of the room.

"Now, you fellers what is it? Air we friends or enemies? I don't keer which it is. I'll meet yer either way," declared Dan Duncan, sternly, as soon as Bob Plympton was out of the room.

"Friends," answered Lionel Bolton, unhesitatingly.

"And you?" to Si Slack.

"Friends," repeated Si.

"Good! Now prove ye'r friendship by ordering a meal. I'm dead tired and hungry."

Lionel Bolton could hardly repress a smile of satisfaction at this request, and he moved hastily toward the door, followed by Si Slack.

"Hold on thar!"

The two men stopped.

"Isn't thar' a bell in this hyar room?"

"No," answered Bolton. "We'll hev' ter go down-stairs ter order ther meal."

"All right. You go down. But Si Slack will stay hyar."

"I wuz goin' down-stairs ter help Lionel order ther grub," faltered Si.

"Yer needn't," said Duncan. "An' look hyar, Bolton. I'll give yer five minutes ter go down an' tell them fellers what I want fer me supper, an' at ther end of thet time I'll shoot Si Slack dead if you air not back. Now git!"

"But—but—what fer?" asked Si, with his eyes bulging at this terrible threat.

"Git!" repeated Duncan, carelessly, as he carried the boy into the bedroom, and, removing his shoes gently enough, laid him on the bed without waking him.

Lionel Bolton left the room, and Si Slack stood near the door, watching Dan Duncan with sheepish glance as he came back from the bedroom, after assuring himself that there was no one there, and that it had no door besides that which led from the big room.

"Now, see hyar, Si Slack, I want ter tell yer something. You and Lionel Bolton hev' er scheme ter rub me out—"

"Mr. Duncan," interrupted Si Slack, deprecatingly.

"Interrupt me ag'in, with ye'r sneaking mister, an' I'll bore er hole through yer without waiting a minute," cried Dan Duncan so fiercely that Si Slack started back involuntarily as Duncan went on:

"I tell yer, thar' is a scheme ter git away with me ter-night, an' mebbe it'll work. But I don't think ez it will, 'cause at ther first sign of treachery I'll shoot yer down, an' then take ther rest of ther crowd ez they come in, one by one."

At this moment the door opened suddenly, and Maza, the dwarf, stepped into the room.

"And hyar's ther first one!" bawled Duncan, in a paroxysm of rage, as he discharged his pistol full in the face of the dwarf.

CHAPTER XVII.

A GHOSTLY HAND.

When Lionel Bolton went down-stairs, ostensibly to order supper for Duncan, he had the full intention to put into operation his scheme against the sport.

He found Bob Plympton in the bar, and told him carelessly that Mr. Duncan wanted supper right away.

"All right," said Bob. "He kin 'ave it when it's ready, but Hi hain't cookin' nothin' in these days. I leaves that to my wife, now that Hi'm keepin' this place."

"Whar's Wallace?" asked Bolton, apparently not heeding Bob Plympton's grumbling remarks.

"He ain't come down."

"Is thet so? Whar' kin he be? Never mind. Send up thet thar' feller's supper ez soon ez yer kin, will yer? I told him ez I'd order it. Send him up er good meal—steak an' 'taters, an' whatever you hev'. I don't think it will make much difference ter him what he hez ter-night, anyhow," he added, significantly.

Thus speaking he went up-stairs, wondering rather what had become of Wallace, but supposing that he would appear when he was needed, for the grip and handshake proved that he knew all the secret signs of the Red Bluff gang, and it was not safe for any one to break his obligations to the gang.

As Bolton reached the top of the stairs the door of the apartment in which he had left Duncan and Si Slack opened, and he saw a little figure slipping through the opening.

"Maza!" he gasped.

Then there was a click, followed by a bang at the door, as if some heavy object had been thrown against it with tremendous violence.

"What in thunder does all this mean?" he muttered, as he pushed open the door and entered the room, just in time to get Duncan's fist full in his mouth.

Mad with rage, he hit out wildly, and the next moment found himself grasped around the legs by Maza.

The dwarf had the strength of a big man, and in an instant he had laid Bolton full length on the floor, and was banging his head on the boards with hearty good-will, using the ears of the prostrate man as handles.

"Take this hyar little devil off me!" yelled Bolton.

Si Slack laughed aloud at his companion's discomfiture, but Duncan kicked the dwarf viciously.

The hard substance that had been thrown at the door was Duncan's pistol, which had missed fire when he aimed at Maza, and which he had hurled at him in a rage.

"Yer little fiend! You stole my boy, after I hed paid yer fer him, and now you are hyar, tryin' ter do me up ag'in! Wal, you'll hev' ter squar' ye'rself with me this time, fer I'll kill yer ez sure ez you are here."

Duncan aimed another kick at the dwarf's head with his heavy boot that would probably have settled him if it had taken effect.

But Maza was gifted with the almost supernatural power of seeing in several directions at once, and keeping his mind on different things simultaneously. He saw that Duncan was coming at him with his boot, and although he had all that he could do to bang Bolton's head on the floor, he managed to duck at the right moment, and thus avoid the kick intended for him.

Duncan's boot came against Bolton's ribs, and made him grunt with pain, just as Maza gave him a last parting bang on the floor, and then jumped away from him and into the bedroom.

As he ran into the room, he shut the door with a crash, and it fastened with a spring lock on the other side.

"Look out! The boy!" yelled Duncan.

"Thet's all right, Duncan. He can't git out of thar'. Thar's no other door 'cept this one," remarked Si Slack, slowly.

"You wooden-headed fool!" bawled Duncan, as he gave Si Slack "the foot," and tripped him by the side of Bolton, who was sitting on the floor, ruefully rubbing his head and his side alternately.

Duncan banged at the door again and again, but it was of solid oak, and hardly quivered under his repeated blows.

"Come hyar an' help me. I know you want ter git away with me, but it won't do yer any good if Maza gits thet boy," he cried.

Bolton recognized the truth of this, probably, for he arose to his feet, and, making a sign to Si Slack to come with him, went to the door of the bedroom and added his own strength to that of Duncan in trying to force it in.

Si Slack helped, and after a few pushes and kicks the door broke from its hinges and fell upon the floor, the three men going with it, and tumbling in a squirming, cursing heap.

Duncan was on his feet first, and looking about the room by the light that came from the larger apartment, saw that it was empty.

Maza and the boy had disappeared, seemingly by magic.

For an instant, the three men stood, utterly confounded. Then Duncan rushed into the other room and brought a lamp, which he set upon the washstand, while he carefully examined every inch of the wall and floor.

There was no window in the room, the only light and air that could get in coming from two skylights, each too small to allow of the passing through of even a child, even if it had been possible to reach them without a ladder.

Dan Duncan stood still after his first hurried examination of the room, and although he was possessed of a great deal of nerve, and had never been known to falter in the face of any human foe, he felt something that was very much like superstitious fear.

They came out of the room, and Dan Duncan stood for a moment in deep thought.

Then he aroused himself with an effort, and drawing his remaining pistol, ran down the stairs and out through the bar-room to the street, where it was pitch dark, save for the light that streamed from the window of the bar-room.

He ran around the house, but not a sign could he see of living creature.

"What shall we do?" asked Si Slack.

looking at Bolton. "We can fix him now with a dig of a knife. I can go out after him, and do him up with one blow."

"Cuss it! What's ther use? If he ain't got ther boy, I don't keer what becomes of him. It's thet devilish dwarf we want ter catch, an' I'll make short work of him if I ever git ther drop on him. I'll tell yer thet. He's ther dirtiest scoundrel in Californy."

"What d'yer say?" broke in the voice of Duncan, as he returned to the room after his unsuccessful hunt for the dwarf.

"Nothin' pertickler," answered Bolton. "What are yer goin' ter do now?"

"I'm goin' ter find thet boy, and when I do it will be good-night to Maza. He hez gone back on me, an' I don't believe in no one any more. Whar's thet supper, anyhow?"

"I didn't think ez you cared anything about supper now thet you hed lost ther boy," suggested Bolton.

"Which shows thet you ain't got no more sense than ther law allows," answered Duncan. "What would I go around without eatin' fer, jist because a cussed dwarf hez found some way of sarcumventing me? No, sirree! I want some supper, an' I want it quick!"

He kicked the door of the ice-chest savagely, and the action put something else into his head.

"What er blamed fool I am. Here is an ice-box, an' I suppose thet must be come virtuals in it. I'll see, anyhow."

He tried the door, but it was locked.

"Allers ther way with these ducks ez keeps hotels or restaurants. They are so afraid thet some one will steal their grub thet they puts it all under lock and key."

So saying, he kicked the lock of the ice-box with all his force, and knocked off the handle.

The result rather surprised him, for the door of the box flew open, and a rush of cold air came with it.

He laughed as he reached into the recesses of the box for something to eat, and then he uttered a yell of deadly fear, as a hand inside seized his own and dragged him into the box.

Then the door closed with a crash, and Si Slack and Lionel Bolton were looking at it with an amazement that actually deprived them of all power to move.

"Wha—what do yer make of thet, Lionel?" whispered Si Slack.

"Hush!" gasped Bolton, with blanched face and trembling limbs.

"Did yer see it?"

"What?"

"Thet hand."

"I saw a hand."

"Did yer notice the color?"

"It was white."

"No, worse than thet. It wuz gray," quaked Si.

"Do yer think it was—was—"

Lionel Bolton could not finish the sentence.

Si Slack clung to his companion, and, putting his lips close to Bolton's ear, whispered, solemnly:

"It was the hand of a dead man, and yet it moved like a live hand!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

MAZA'S MYSTERIOUS DRUGS.

It was just about the time that Dan Duncan was dragged into the great ice-chest by the hand of a dead man, as Si Slack said, or perhaps a little later, when a figure stole around the house, and made its way toward the stables.

The figure was that of Maza, the dwarf, and he held in his arms the form of Aubrey Moore, who was still fast asleep.

Dan Duncan had taken care that the child should sleep. It was easy to give him something that would insure his remaining insensible for several hours, and Duncan had no scruple about doing anything that would serve his own ends.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Maza laughed silently, but heartily, as he stood, with the child in his arms, and thought of the neat way in which he had fooled Dan Duncan and the others.

"They couldn't fool me," he muttered. "I've been in zat house too many times not to know every in and out. What a

strange z'ing it is z'at such a slick feller as z'at Dan Duncan did not think z'at z'ere might be a door even where it did not show."

He walked cautiously around the house to a spot near the stables where he could see the front door of the house, and resumed his meditation.

"As if any one making a secret door would not hide it so z'at it would not be found without careful search. Ishaw! Z'e door in z'at bedroom is so plain as z'e nose on z'e face if a man has any sense. Why, I walk out wiz' z'e leetle boy so easy as never was."

He went into the stable, which was not locked, for the rule of hanging horse-thieves was as strict then as it is to-day in the West, and it was not considered worth while to trust to locks to preserve horses from marauders. The fear of a rope was regarded as the best protection.

"I don't think I want to ride horseback all night," he muttered. "I'll just take my own buggy and that roan mare, and jog comfortably along to Sacramento. Then I'll take a train, and make the best of my way to Chicago. It will fool z'e smart fellows z'at think z'ey can get z'e best of Maza."

While he was muttering thus, Maza was busy. He lay the child upon a heap of straw in a corner of the stable, and then, deftly feeling his way to the roan mare, which he knew was in the stall nearest to the door, whispered a few soothing words to the animal.

The mare knew Maza's voice, and, if he was a rascal, the mare did not know it. It has often been remarked that the worst of men can make friends with animals, and be treated and regarded by them as if they were angels.

"Whoa, mare! Whoa, my beauty! Maladetto! How are you standing, my beauty?"

With nimble finger he released the head of the mare from the halter, and then, taking her harness from a nail, put it on quickly.

"It is late to take you out, my darling, but you must go. Z'is means a great deal to Maza, and I know you vant to do vhat you can for me."

Whether the mare was anxious to please Maza or not, certain it is that she obeyed him in a docile manner, and when he led her to the buggy that stood under the carriage shed, she backed up to it, and was perfectly quiet while he harnessed her up.

"Z'ere you are, and as soon as I put z'e leetle boy in, ve vill go down z'e road to Sacramento. So!"

It was a top-covered buggy, and there were two or three robes lying at its side in the stable. These Maza wrapped around the boy, and laid him flat in the bottom of the buggy.

Then he went to the mare's head, and led her gently and noiselessly into the road, past the house.

"Maladetto! If any of them people come out, I shoot and kill them," he muttered, and he held a Winchester rifle in the hollow of his arm, with his finger on the trigger, as an earnest of his sincerity.

No one came out, however, and soon Maza and Aubrey were bowling along the road, with the dwarf chuckling to himself over the way in which he had outwitted everybody, and obtained possession of this boy, who was so precious to the rascals, as well as to his mother.

"Git up, mare! Git up!" he yelled, in the excitement of his triumph, giving the mare a cut with his whip as he spoke.

The mare bounded along, but she could not shake off a figure that was clinging to the vehicle behind, and that evidently intended to go with Maza to the end of his journey.

Maza had gone about two miles with the mysterious figure clinging to the back of the buggy, when he thought he detected the sound of galloping hoofs behind him.

"Z'ey are after me, eh?" he muttered. "Z'at is vhat I expected. Vell, if z'ey catch Maza, z'ey vill not know anything about z'e boy. If I can get to my crib in z'e canyon, z'ey can chase me all z'ey please."

He touched up the roan mare, and she responded gallantly. She was as swift as a bird, and the light buggy behind fairly danced over the rough road.

"If z'e buggy don't break, I get away easy. But it is hard on z'e springs—z'is bumpety-bump."

Maza knew that there were no fast horses in the stable at Bob Plympton's place, and that all the horses that were there had been ridden hard during the day before, and would be in poor condition to-day. The mare was the only fresh animal in the stable, and that was the one Maza had secured.

"She my mare, anyhow," he mused. "So z'ey could not say I take z'e property of any one else. I too good to do z'at, anyhow."

He laughed at this idea of his being too good, and again urged the mare forward, as he thought the sound of the hoof-beats behind was getting nearer.

The pursuers and pursued kept about the same relative distance, however, for two hours, and then Maza saw that he was near the spot where the secret home was situated.

"Stop! Stop, or I'll blow your brains out," yelled a voice, as Maza, having stowed away the horse and buggy in a vacant space behind a clump of trees, was carrying the child into his crib behind the great bowlders.

"Vhat for I stop?"

Bang! The owner of the voice, who was none other than Wallace, had discharged his pistol, and if the dwarf had not made a lucky move just at the instant, his career would have ended at that time. As it was, the bullet clipped off a bit of the rock behind which Maza retreated, and sent dust and splinters of rock flying all over him and the still sleeping boy.

The next instant Maza was safe in his room, with the furnace, the retorts, the alembic and other paraphernalia that had given Si Slack such a severe turn about a month before.

But, with all his cleverness, Maza had not been able to rid himself of the mysterious figure that had clung to the back of his buggy all the way from Tahoe, and who was now hiding behind the furnace, with a pistol in his hand, ready for anything that might turn up.

The mysterious figure was that of Mug Hinkley.

"Now, my beauty, I bring you to yourself," muttered Maza, as he took down a certain small bottle from a shelf, and poured from it into a tin cup a few drops of green liquid.

He looked at the stuff intently for a moment, and a smile made his great mouth still wider.

Then he poured some water into the cup with the green stuff, and it bubbled and hissed with a cloud of steam.

"I wonder if this hyar feller isn't ther devil himself," uttered Mug Hinkley, as he watched these proceedings with the utmost awe. "I think it would be only right to kill him now. I could send a bullet through his big head in a second."

He dodged down behind his furnace again, for the dwarf was coming unpleasantly near, and Mug did not know what he might be going to do with the liquid in the cup.

"Perhaps he's goin' ter p'ison thet kid. If I thought he wuz, I'd shoot him, if all the devils he hez at his elbow wuz ter come arter me an' take me down below."

It did look as if the dwarf had some such intention as Mug had hinted at, for he stepped over to the place where the boy lay sleeping in his rugs, on the floor, and put the tin cup toward his face.

Mug poised his revolver ready for a shot, meaning to pull the trigger as soon as the edge of the tin cup touched the boy's lips.

"I'll give him every chance," he thought, "because I don't want to make no mistake. But he ain't goin' ter give thet p'ison ter ther kid while I'm hyar."

The dwarf brought the tin cup nearer and nearer to the child's face, and there was an expression of infernal amusement on his great flabby countenance that made Mug Hinkley's finger itch to pull the trigger.

"What in thunder is he tryin' ter do? I wish he would hurry up an' do something, for I can't hold this in much longer."

As this passed through Mug Hinckley's mind he saw the dwarf waving the tin cup backward and forward under the child's nose, allowing the vapor to go up his nostrils.

"Z'ere! Z'at will bring you around, my boy. I can't let you sleep all z'e day, you know. Maladetto! Z'is stuff not seem strong enough. I must put more of z'e drug in it."

He stopped and listened.

"Maladetto! Is z'at fool finding his way into z'is place? If he is, I kil him right away."

He climbed upon a table that stood against one of the rocky walls, and placed his eye to a crevice that Mug Hinckley now noticed for the first time, and which evidently, from the dwarf's observations, gave him a view of the outer world.

"Ah, z'ere you are, Silver Sam. I see you. You call yourself Wallace, and put big whiskers on yourself, an' z'ink people not know you. I swear to you anywhere, an' I make z'is a hot day's work for you yet. Vell, you can wait. You not find your way in here, now. You have no idea of z'e way in, I can see."

With a hoarse chuckle, the dwarf leaped down from the table, and again looked at the boy, who was tossing uneasily, like a sleeper just awaking.

"Now, z'at is a funny thing," commented the dwarf, with an epicurean relish of the power he possessed that made Mug Hinckley shiver, tough as he was. "Here I make z'e boy half wake up, and z'ere I keep him till I give him some more of z'is stuff. Yes, science is a great z'ing, and Maza have it down fine."

He was about to go back to the bottle that stood on a shelf over his head when again something caught his ear, and he jumped up swiftly to the table, and looked through the crevice.

"I not see him now. Well, it not matter. He cannot get in, and z'at all I care for."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when a hand seized him by the back of the neck, and he found himself in a desperate struggle with Silver Sam, while Mug Hinckley, with a yell, seized the boy and tried to find his way out.

"Maladetto! What you do?"

"Do? You fiend! I'll show you what I do," answered Silver Sam, his usual coolness merged into a fiery passion that rendered him incoherent. "I have you now, an' I don't mean to let go till I hev' choked ther life out of yer."

He gave the dwarf's neck a pinch as he spoke, but the little creature had such strength of muscle, to say nothing of his will, that he actually resisted the pressure upon his throat by bracing himself, and Silver Sam's fingers made hardly any impression upon him.

"Curse yer! Ye'r neck ain't like an honest man's!" yelled Silver Sam, with a disgust that would have been ludicrous under less terrible circumstances. "A gentleman would let himself be choked like a gentleman. But you won't even take your medicine peaceably."

"Whar's this cussed door?" bawled Hinckley, who had the boy in his arms, and was trying in vain to find a means of egress.

The dwarf emitted a gurgling chuckle.

"Let go of my neck, Silver Sam, and perhaps I show you z'e way out."

Silver Sam's only response was to try still harder to choke the dwarf.

"Listen, Sam," went on Maza. "You cannot find z'e way out of z'is place, and if you did, what good would it do? Z'e boy is under z'e influence of a drug, and z'ere is only one way to get him out of it."

"What do you mean?" demanded Silver Sam, still holding the dwarf's throat.

"I mean z'at z'ere is only one antidote for z'e drug I give to z'e boy in z'e bedroom at Plympton's house, and z'at I am z'e only person in z'e world z'at know what z'at antidote is."

"Pshaw! I don't believe you," answered Silver Sam, contemptuously.

"How do you get out of this?" cried Mug Hinckley, again.

With a mighty effort, the dwarf tore himself away from the grip of Silver Sam, and darted across the room to the shelf where his bottles were ranged in rows. Jumping up like a monkey, he pulled down first one little bottle and then another, while Mug Hinckley and Silver Sam looked at him in dismay, and fearing they hardly knew what.

"Put z'at boy down!" commanded Maza, in menacing tones. "Put him down!"

For answer, Silver Sam leaped across the room at one bound, and was about to seize the dwarf by the throat again, when Maza sprang out of the way with a sideways movement that brought him smash against Mug Hinckley.

"Grab him, Mug!" cried Silver Sam.

But Hinckley was holding the boy in his arms, and had all he could do to defend his charge from the dwarf. So he only drew away from the little wretch, and tried to keep the boy out of danger.

Maza chuckled, and taking the tin cup with the green drug in it, poured the stuff out on the floor. Then he poured something from one of the bottles in his hands into the cup.

It looked like water, but it emitted a pungent odor, that made Mug Hinckley cough, and caused Maza to laugh again.

Silver Sam was nervously fingering his pistol, but was afraid to fire, even if he had intended to do so, for the dwarf had stationed himself so near Mug Hinckley that there was a strong likelihood of the bullet hitting either Mug or the boy, or perhaps both.

"I ain't even sure of my shooting since I've been dealing with this brute," muttered Silver Sam, and it really seemed as if the dwarf exercised a mysterious power over every one around him to the point of even destroying the skill of marksmen.

"Vill you give me z'at boy?" asked Maza, looking full into the face of Mug Hinckley.

"I'll smash ye'r skull! That's what I'll do with yer. Look hyar. Show me ther way out of this hyar place, and I'll let yer go, and won't never run yer down fer all ez yer hev' done ter me. But if yer don't, why, I'll keep on ye'r trail till I find yer, if it takes me all ther rest of my life."

Mug Hinckley said this slowly and impressively, but it only made the dwarf laugh.

He saw that Silver Sam was creeping cautiously toward him, and that he could not get rid of his two visitors and keep the boy in his power, unless he did something desperate, and did it quickly.

Nearer and nearer came Silver Sam, with the dwarf watching him out of the corners of his red-rimmed eyes.

There was no apprehension to be seen in the glance of Maza, but there was a deadly purpose that warned Silver Sam of trouble to come, although he could not tell in what shape it might visit him.

"Now, Maza, I have you!" yelled Silver Sam, suddenly, as he jumped across the intervening space toward Maza.

The detective's hand was upraised, and it seemed as if Maza was to be beaten at his own game, after all, when, with one of those demoniacal chuckles that seemed to stamp him as a creature of the lower regions, the dwarf poured a green liquid from the second bottle in his hand into the tin cup upon the white stuff that he had previously placed there.

For a second there was no result. Then Maza gave the cup a quick shake.

Instantly there was a thunderous report, like the firing of a salvo of artillery.

The room was filled with green and red smoke, and there was a deadly, fetid odor that made Silver Sam and Mug Hinckley gasp for breath as they fell flat upon the floor, and felt that their last hour had come.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN APPARITION.

For a few moments Lionel Bolton and Si Slack stood like men transfixed when Duncan had been drawn into the great ice-chest by the supposed dead hand.

They had seen enough to convince them that the chest was not an ice-box after all, but a secret means of egress and ingress of the room.

"Whose hand do yer think thet wuz, Lionel?" asked Si, when he had recovered his nerve enough to speak. "It looked like a woman's hand, but it seemed ter hev' ther strength of er man's."

"Of course it hed. Yer don't suppose thet thar' is any woman in Californy ez could pull Dan Duncan into er place ez he didn't want ter go, do yer? No. Thet wuz er man, an' I hev' an idee thet I know whose hand it wuz."

"Whose?"

"Thet feller, Wallace's, as we wuz talkin' to hyar awhile ago."

Si Slack's face brightened for a moment, but became blank again on the instant.

"No; thet explanation won't do. Thet hand wuz dead, I tell yer. Thet warn't ther hand of Wallace or any other feller ez lives in this hyar world."

"You air allers scared at something," returned Bolton, with a sneer. "If I hedn't more pluck than you, I'd go East, whar' they don't care so much whether er man hez sand er not, so long ez he can work. But you air ther wrong sort o' man fer Californy."

Si Slack did not reply. There was nothing to be said. Si knew that his companion would never believe that he had pluck, no matter what he might do, and he also knew that there were as brave men in the East as could be found in the West. So, altogether, fool as he might be, he considered that he might laugh at the vaporings of Lionel Bolton.

"Wal, we can't stay hyar," said Bolton, after a pause. "We'll hev' ter git out, an' ther first thing ter do is ter find out whar' thet feller Wallace hez gone."

Bolton opened the door to go down the stairs, and faced—Alma Moore!

For a moment he looked, without saying a word, at the mother of the boy who had been taken away so strangely. Then, as he understood the full significance of having the mother on his side, he put out his hand, and said, warmly:

"Mrs. Moore, how are you? I thought you were in Chicago."

The woman's bosom heaved with indignation at the presumption of this man in daring to speak to her after the part he had taken in trying to make her the wife of Dan Duncan, and she did not answer.

"Yer don't need ter bear no malice, Mrs. Moore. All ez I did wuz only in fun. I know you air not ther wife of Dan Duncan. If I didn't know it, would I call yer Mrs. Moore?"

"Where is my boy?"

The words came from her lips in hard, cold accents, and there was no trace of sorrow in them.

"Where's my boy?" she repeated, as Bolton did not answer.

"I—I—don't know. Thet's jist what I've been tryin' ter find out. He wuz hyar, but I didn't hev' him. It wuz Maza, the dwarf, ez hed ther kid. Thet is, after he got him away from Dan Duncan. An' now I don't know whar' ther kid is, or Duncan neither."

For reasons of his own Lionel Bolton was anxious to be on good terms with Mrs. Moore, and she could see that he was telling the truth.

"Ho, here you hare, Mrs. Moore. Hi've been a-lookin' fer you heverywhere."

It was Bob Plympton that spoke, and he was standing in the doorway, looking in wonder from Alma to the two men with whom she seemed to be on speaking terms at least. Knowing that they had been conspiring against her, he could not exactly understand how they had managed to heal their differences sufficiently to even hold conversation with each other.

"These men tell me that my boy is in the power of that terrible dwarf again. Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

She wrung her hands in agony, as she thought of her child at the mercy of this man, whom she dreaded more than any one else in the world—more even than Dan Duncan.

"Is that so? Then hit's all right. I know where to find that blooming rascal, and I'll take you to 'im in a pig's whisper," said Bob Plympton, joyously.

"Let us go at once, then?"

"Yes, we'll go," added Lionel Bolton.

"Will yer? I don't know as you will. I rather think ez you'll 'ave to stay 'ere, unless you want to go hout somewhere. I don't think we want you with hus."

"We wuz only goin' ter give yer er hand, in case Maza should be ugly, ez he's pretty sure ter be."

"Hif he's ugly, we can fix 'im. Hi can shoot pretty straight, and Mrs. Moore can huse a gun, too. Don't be afraid. We can attend to Maza's case without any 'elp from you."

Bolton frowned fiercely, but Bob Plympton, with all his fat good-nature, could be very stern when he chose, and Bolton knew that it would not be safe to provoke him too far. Bob Plympton, the proprietor of this big hotel and gambling saloon, and Bob Plympton, the chef of the Red Bluff gang, were two entirely different persons.

Without condescending to say another word to Lionel Bolton, Bob beckoned to Alma Moore, and they went out, and left Lionel and Si Slack in possession of the room.

"Wal, what d'yer think o' thet?" observed Si, as soon as they were alone.

"It's all right. I'll bring her to time. She can't give me no sich bluff ez thet. I'm goin' ter hev' thet kid of hers, an' I'll make her pay fer it, too."

As he spoke Lionel Bolton walked to the door of the room to go out, with a determined expression on his face.

"Locked, by Caesar!" he exclaimed, as he tried the handle.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when the lamps in the room went out together, and the room was in utter darkness.

Si Slack was trembling in superstitious fear and wondering what was to come next, when both men were startled by a groan that came from the direction of the ice-chest—or what they had supposed was an ice-chest.

"Thet's Dan Duncan's voice, sure," whispered Bolton.

"I know it."

"Mebbe some one is layin' him out."

"Good thing, too."

Neither of the men had any sympathy with Dan Duncan, but they did not relish this preternatural way of his being destroyed, if that really was the case.

Their eyes were turned toward the ice-chest, when suddenly they saw, or thought they saw a faint illumination in that spot in the darkness of the room.

"Look! Look!" whispered Si Slack, in awe-stricken tones.

It was unnecessary to tell Lionel Bolton to look, for he was staring with terrible intensity at the increasing glow that seemed to stand out in the darkness, and about which there could be no mistake now.

There was a square of blue light, through which they could see the door of the ice-chest, which somehow was transparent, showing behind it the face of Dan Duncan, staring, with glassy, vacant eyes, straight at them.

It was a dead face, and yet there was a fitful flush stealing through the dead gray of his skin that indicated that some life yet remained.

"Dan!" cried Lionel Bolton, involuntarily, making a step toward the apparition.

"Stop, Lionel!" gasped Si, as he laid his hand on his companion's arm. "Don't go to it."

"Don't be er cur, Si. I'm goin' ter find out what this means. This hyar devilish place is takin' all ther nerve out o' me, an' I'd jist as soon die now ez take any more of it."

Saying this, and screwing up his courage by a mighty effort, Bolton pulled himself away from Si Slack, and threw himself against the ice-chest.

But he was too late. Just as he moved the light disappeared, and when he touched the big chest is felt as naturally like wood as any prosaic chest could.

At the same moment the lamps blazed

out again, and everything was as it had been before they went out.

"Cuss it! I'll find out what trick these hyar fellers are playin' on me, an' I'll kill thet thar' Bob Plympton!" yelled Bolton, as he kicked at the door of the ice-chest and then tried to pull it open.

It was tightly locked, and as he tugged at it he heard, distinctly, although muffled through being at the other side of the door a demoniacal laugh that he could have sworn came from the lips and throat of Dan Duncan.

"I'll find out what this hyar blamed nonsense is, I tell yer, Si. Come an' help me open the door of this hyar room."

Si went to the door with Bolton, and both seized the handle.

"Now, Si, pull!"

Si did as he was told, and Bolton pulled, too, with all his might.

The result was unexpected. The door had been unlocked, and when the two men tugged at it, they both fell backward into the room, and Lo Shun came in on top of them.

"Yer blamed yaller Chink, what air yer doin' hyar?" demanded Bolton, as he seized the Chinaman by the arm and shook him as a terrier would a rat.

"I'm working for Mistle Plympton, allee samee barkeep. I sellee beer, whiskey, an' deal clards. I good man now—velly good man."

"Whar's Plympton now?"

"Plympton?"

"Yes, Plympton."

"Mistle Plympton, whatee keep the hotel?"

The innocence in the Chinaman's face might have deceived one who did not know his cunning. But Lionel Bolton had seen Lo Shun prevaricate before, and had laughed at it, when it did not concern himself. He knew perfectly well that his only object was to gain time, and that he understood the question the first time.

"If you don't tell me what I want ter know I'll skin yer alive!" howled Bolton, in a tempest of wrath.

"Skinnee me alive? Oh, no, that would hurtee me."

Lionel raised his hand threateningly, and Lo Shun dodged.

"Mistle Plympton gonee to bed."

"You lie!" shouted Bolton, as he aimed another blow at the Chinaman's head, which he dodged as promptly and cleverly as before.

"Yer blamed Chink, I'll lick yer anyhow. I hate er liar!" declared Bolton, in a burst of virtuous indignation.

He rushed at the frightened Chinaman again, and would undoubtedly have planted his big fist full in the face of Lo Shun, but for an interruption that made him start back, with his eyes bulging from his head.

Dan Duncan, with a face ghastly white, and the same vacant stare that had been there when it appeared in the ice-chest in the midst of blue light, stood in the doorway, with his hand upraised warningly.

CHAPTER XX.

MUG'S TENDER SECRET.

The explosion that shook Maza's retreat gave a shock to Mug Hinckley and Silver Sam from which they did not recover for several minutes.

The two chemicals that the dwarf had mixed, and that he calculated would make diversion enough for him to get away with the child, were thoroughly understood by him.

Maza had studied chemistry long and carefully, and this was not the first time his skill had been used for the furtherance of a nefarious project.

As a member of the Red Bluff gang, it was desirable that he should use his knowledge in this way occasionally, to blow open a safe or a treasure box, and he had done it willingly enough. Such a clumsy thing as dynamite he regarded with contempt. He could take two innocent liquids, as he had in this case, and rend the strongest iron apart or blow tons of rock out of the heart of a mountain.

When at last Silver Sam gradually realized where he was, the smoke from the

chemicals was still rolling in clouds across the room, and although the locomotive headlights were burning, the smoke made the room so dark that he could not see who was in it.

"Hello, Mug," he exclaimed, as he made out Hinckley lying near him, flat on his face.

Hinckley did not move.

"I wonder whether that dwarf has actually killed him. I should not be surprised. Hello, Mug!"

Silver Sam managed to get to his feet, although he felt pretty shaky.

He felt himself all over, and a smile stole over his face as he found that no bones were broken, and that beyond a jar there was no harm done.

He stepped over to Hinckley, and pulled him around so that his face was uppermost. It was blackened by the smoke, for he had been nearer to the dwarf than the detective, but it was not hurt in any way.

"Hello, Mug!"

Hinckley slowly opened his eyes and looked at Sam in a dazed kind of way.

"What's all this hyar racket about?" asked Mug, faintly.

"Why, that confounded Maza has got away with the boy. That is what it is all about," answered the detective.

"I thought there was an earthquake."

"Oh, no. Only some of the pleasantries of that Maza. Come! Get up! You are not hurt, are you?"

"I dun'no'. Seems ter me ez if I'm shaken up considerable."

As he spoke Mug crawled to his feet, and after stamping on the floor once or twice and stretching his arms with a jerk, he found that he was as good as ever, much to his own surprise.

They stumbled to the outer air after some trouble, and tried to pierce the gloom. Then they listened.

"Do you hear it, Mug? Wheels?"

"Of course I do. Thet thar' Maza hez jumped inter his buggy ag'in, an' gone away ter Bull Canyon. Ther mare must be pretty tired. But she's got lots of pluck, and I guess she'll carry him ter ther place. Then I s'pose he'll take ther stage ter Sacramento, and perhaps ter Frisco."

"That's what I think myself. We'll have to foot it after him. I guess we can cover that distance to-night. I'm bound to have that boy to-night. Maza kept him out of sight for a month, but the game must be up now."

"Maza didn't hev' him. It wuz Duncan ez hed ther kid ter-night, and Maza stole him by runnin' clean through ther wall of ther house, I'm told."

The detective laughed at this description of Maza's operation in the hotel of Bob Plympton, but as there could be no question that the dwarf had the boy now, it mattered little how he accomplished his purpose, and Silver Sam did not argue this point with his companion.

"It's er long walk ter Bull Canyon," observed Mug Hinckley, as he examined his revolvers to make sure that they were all right. "I wish we could ride."

"So do I. But as there are no horses here, and it is too far to go back to Plympton's place, I do not see any use in talking about it. We just have to hoof it, Mug."

"What's ther matter with takin' a horse or two out of ther 'stables of ther Red Bluff gang? I know whar' they air, and so do you."

Silver Sam took Mug Hinckley's hand and wrung it warmly.

"Mug, you have more gumption than I gave you credit for."

"Oh, I guess I ain't er chump altogether," returned Mug, somewhat hurt at the low estimate placed upon his mental caliber by his companion.

"Let's git out of this," said Silver Sam.

The two men started out into the road and moved along swiftly in the direction of the cave of the Red Bluff gang.

The shock of the explosion had dazed them to some degree, and their hearing was most likely less acute than usual, or they might have been aware that there were other travelers on the road, not far behind them, in the shape of four men, all four of whom seemed to be suspicious of

at least some of their companions, judging by the way they spread themselves over the road.

Although Silver Sam and Mug Hinckley were unaware of their presence, it may be said, for the benefit of the reader, that they were Lionel Bolton, Si Slack, Dan Duncan, and the Chinaman, Lo Shun.

All of them had the same purpose—to run down Maza and obtain possession of Aubrey Moore.

Hour after hour the detective and his companion marched along with the four other men not far behind them, watching them as the morning dawned and rather enjoying the fact of Silver Sam and Mug Hinckley being ignorant of their proximity.

There was no conversation, for each of the four men felt that there might be a desperate fight for possession of the boy, even if he was taken from Maza, and they did not feel inclined to talk to each other.

At last Silver Sam saw the narrow pathway that led up to the entrance of the cave that formed the headquarters of the Red Bluff gang, and he proceeded cautiously. He was not prepared to fight the whole gang, or even a considerable portion of it, and he did not want to be dragged into a broil with them anyhow, at this time, whatever he might do at a future day.

"Thar's ther stable," said Mug, pointing to the spot at which he knew the place was situated.

Without a word Silver Sam plunged into the recess, and immediately came forth with an expression of dismay on his countenance.

"There isn't a single horse there."

Mug went into the stable and saw that Silver Sam was right. The stable was empty.

It might be wondered why the four men following did not see Silver Sam and Mug going into the stable, and why they did not come themselves to look for horses.

The fact is that they had turned out of the pathway a little way back, and were now on the main road that has been already described as being away from the canyon in which the Red Bluff gang had taken up their headquarters.

They all knew that there were no horses in the stables of the gang, and were not disposed to waste time looking for what they knew were not there.

"Wal, I s'pose thar's nothin' fer it but to plow ahead," observed Mug, disconsolately, when he had assured himself that there were really no horses at hand.

"That's all we can do," agreed the detective.

The two men retraced their steps for some distance until they reached the main road, and prepared to plod their way to Bull Canyon, where they calculated they would strike the stage to Sacramento, with old Bill Long probably handling the ribbons, and thus pursue their journey after Maza and the boy.

"I know very well that Maza will go to Sacramento, because he will feel safer in a large city than in a country place. When he gets there we may expect to hear that he is ready to make terms with Alma Moore for the return of the boy."

"Will yer let her pay anything ter thet miserable little skunk?"

"The important thing is for her to get her child, and it will be better for her to submit to blackmail than not to get him."

"You're right, of course, Sam. Though I hate ter see her beaten by sich er thing ez Maza. Hows'ever, I'll make things even with him arterward. I've swore ter help Alma Moore ter git her boy, an' I'm goin' ter do it. Do yer remember when yer wuz so mad at me 'cause I spoke ter her ez she got out o' the stage at Jim Morgan's over a month ago?"

The detective nodded.

"Wal, I wuzn't so bad ez you thought. I only took er fancy ter her, an' I meant no disrespect when I spoke ter her, though you took ther worst kind of a'fense."

"It is not safe for a stranger to say anything to a lady in California, you know, Mug," answered the detective, smilingly.

"You're right, ez you allers are, Sam."

Wal, now I'll tell yer er secret. You won't tell nobody, will yer?"

Mug Hinckley's hard, knotted face screwed up into an earnest expression of doubt and anxiety as he asked the question, and the detective smiled.

"Of course I won't tell anybody, if it is a secret. Drive ahead with it."

"Wal, I—"

Mug Hinckley stopped and looked around him to make sure that they could not be overheard.

As they happened to be passing along a plain where they could see around them for several miles, it was not possible that there were any eavesdroppers, and Mug went on:

"Wal, yer see, I—"

He stopped again, and looked sheepishly at Silver Sam.

"This must be a mighty important secret, Mug, if you are so afraid of telling it. Don't say anything if it hurts you so."

"Yes, I will, Sam, 'cause I think you are er friend o' mine, an' I feel ez if I ought ter tell yer right hyar, thet—thet—"

"Go on."

"Oh, cuss it! It's awful hard to go on."

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, I think yer kin. When you know what it is all erbout. Ther fact is, Sam, I'm—I'm—I'm mashed on Mrs. Moore."

If Mug Hinckley had expected Silver Sam to be surprised, he must have been satisfied. Surprise is not a strong enough word for the utter amazement expressed in the face of the detective.

He stood stock still, staring at the blushing physiognomy of Mug Hinckley, and then he pulled off his heavy beard that he had worn all night, as if it was absolutely necessary that he should cool off his face. At last he found breath to exclaim:

"Mashed on Mrs. Moore!"

Mug nodded with a smile.

"Does she know that you are—are—mashed on her?"

"No."

"What do you think she'll say when she does know it?"

Mug grinned and stroked his chin.

"What did you say?"

"Didn't say nothing."

"Well, do say something. What do you think Mrs. Moore will say when she knows that you have honored her with your preference?"

There was considerable irony in the detective's tones, but Mug Hinckley did not notice it.

"Wal, I don't erzackly know. She may take right ter me, an' then ag'in she may not," answered Mug, musingly. "It's thet ez I want you ter help me in."

"How?"

"Wal, you see. I ain't sure erbout ther way to ask er woman ter marry yer, an' I thought ez p'r'aps you'd pave ther way like, an' help me ter say what hez ter be said."

"You want me to win Mrs. Moore for you, eh?" asked Silver Sam, as he replaced his big whiskers and was again the rough-looking Wallace that we have seen at Bob Plympton's hotel.

"Yes; if yer want ter put it thet way."

"Well, Mug, I'll tell you what I think about it. There would be no use in trying to get Mrs. Moore to listen to anything of that kind until she gets her boy."

"I guess thet's right."

"I am sure it is. So the first thing to do is to push this thing to the end, and run down Maza. When you can go to Mrs. Moore with Aubrey and say, 'Here is your child, Mrs. Moore,' you may stand a chance. But I would not say anything now."

"And you will help me?"

"I'll do anything I can."

"Thanks, old man."

"You haven't anything to thank me for yet," responded the detective, dryly.

CHAPTER XXI.

MAZA IS DESPERATE.

The conversation between the two men was broken off suddenly by an exclamation from Mug Hinckley altogether unconnected with the subject they had been pursuing.

They had been walking up a steep in-

cline while talking, and now, standing on an eminence, the gaze could sweep the plain for many miles on the early morning light.

A long way ahead, some five or six miles, Mug had distinguished a vehicle that he knew was not that in which Maza was carrying away the child.

It was a kind of open wagon, and Mug could make out that it carried four people—two men and two women.

"Thet's queer. I didn't see thet cursed thing pass us," he exclaimed, "but I kin sw'ar thet it is ther wagon I saw in Plympton's place last night at the back of ther house. Kin yer make out who them people is, Sam?"

For answer, Silver Sam drew from a pocket a pair of field-glasses, made to fold into a small compass for convenience of carrying. When opened, the glasses were a formidable-looking object, with powerful lenses.

"Them's er great pair o' lookers," commented Mug, as Silver Sam adjusted the glasses and focused them on the wagon.

"Just as I thought," observed the detective, after gazing at the wagon for a few moments. "It's Mrs. Moore, Bob Plympton and his wife, and—and— Who is the other? Oh, yes, I see. It's that confounded Chinaman, Lo Shun. They must look out if they have that fellow with them. He's the most treacherous Chink I ever met, and I would not trust any of them very far."

"Whar' do yer suppose they air goin'?"

"I guess Bob Plympton is on the trail of the dwarf, and I am glad he is. I'd rather see him with Alma Moore than any one. And when he has his wife with him, he's worth three times as much, in sense and courage."

"Kin yer see anything of Maza?"

"No. He must have taken the other road. But it makes no difference. They'll all get back to Sacramento sooner or later."

The two men had entered another canyon, and the fir trees growing on the steep cliffs cast great shadows over their path, and made it difficult to see ahead very far.

The eminence from which they had seen the wagon was the beginning of the canyon, but they had descended rapidly now, and were shut right in from the plain that lay beyond.

"Say, Sam, look hyar!" suddenly exclaimed Mug, as he pointed to the ground.

"What is that?"

"Marks of wheels, isn't it?"

"That's all right. I suppose it's the track of the wagon that we saw out on the plain a little while ago."

"Think so? Wal, I s'pose you're right."

"I suppose I am, because—wait! No, I'm not right. These tracks have been made only a few minutes, and they are not those of the wagon, either."

"How do you know?" asked Mug, incredulously.

"In the first place, that is a heavy wagon, with wide-tired wheels, and in the second, the wheels of the wagon are well geared, and run straight."

"Wal?"

"Can't you see that these tracks are wobbly, showing that the wheels are loosely hung, and have a great deal of play? These tracks were not made by that wagon."

"How were they made, then? Do you know that?"

"I do. They are the tracks of Maza's buggy, and as they have been freshly made, the buggy cannot be far away. Are your pistols ready?"

"They are always ready."

"Good. Then be prepared to shoot for your life. Come on."

With his own revolver in his hand ready for instant use, Silver Sam pressed on.

The path ran in and out, and it was impossible to see very far ahead. For this reason the detective went along cautiously, not knowing how soon he might stumble upon Maza.

"He got pretty near the edge right here," observed Sam, as he stopped and pointed to a spot where the tracks of the wheels ran close to the brow of the precipice. "If this wasn't rock and perfectly sound, the buggy would have broken away

the ground, and taken a nice little tumble of about four thousand feet."

"If it wuz jist Maza, I should say it wuz er pity he didn't go over," remarked Mug Hinckley. "And yet I wouldn't want even a horse to die in sich company."

"You forget the boy," said the detective, quietly.

"By Caesar! So I did. I didn't forgit the boy altogether, yer know, but I forgot about him being in thet thar' buggy with Maza. Don't never tell Mrs. Moore ez I said thet, or she won't hev' nothin' ter say ter me, sure."

Mug Hinckley said this so earnestly that Silver Sam burst into a laugh—that he suppressed at once, however, as he thought that perhaps the dwarf might be within earshot.

Suddenly an awful shriek of terror broke the stillness of the canyon.

"What's thet?" exclaimed Mug, running forward after the detective, who had already made a dart toward a sharp turn in the path that hid the edge of the canyon for some distance.

The detective reached the curve first, and, as he looked ahead, he uttered a loud cry, almost as terrible as that which had been heard a moment before.

Mug Hinckley joined Silver Sam, and he, too, stood transfixed with horror.

The horse attached to the buggy in which Maza and the boy were riding had taken fright at something, and had jumped off the precipice, so that he was hanging some feet below the path, with his feet resting upon the stump of a pine tree that had grown out from the face of the cliff, and been broken off by lightning or some other natural force.

The vehicle had followed the horse, and was balanced on the stump, threatening to turn over into the frightful depths at every plunge of the horse.

Maza was holding the reins from force of habit, but there was nothing he could do to save himself, and it seemed as if there could be only one end to his adventure—the falling over of the buggy, and his own death.

"Whar's the boy?" gasped Mug.

"I see him," answered the detective.

"There he is, lying on the bottom of the buggy, scared to death, no doubt."

The white face of the child could be seen over the dashboard. He was evidently partly unconscious of his danger, if not altogether so.

The buggy swayed to and fro, and there was every probability that it would go over.

The vehicle was entirely out of the detective's reach, and he was afraid to make any violent attempt to rescue the child, lest he might scare the horse, and thus cause him to make a fatal plunge.

Maza, afraid to look around from his horse, knew instinctively that some one was near, so he cried to them to help him.

"Climb out on z'e tree and lift z'e boy out. Z'en I hold on to z'e stump, and get out, too."

"You'll be fired over inter ther other world afore you kin do thet," warned Mug, "an' er good thing, too."

Maza did not turn to look, but determined that the boy should not be taken out of the buggy until he himself was rescued.

"Look out there, Maza! Sit still, and perhaps I can get the boy out," cried Silver Sam, as he prepared to let himself down upon the stump and crawl out to the buggy.

"Don't come, or I tip z'e whole z'ing over, and go to z'e bottom, boy and all," yelled Maza, fiercely. Sam stopped at this sudden threat, and waited for an explanation.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Nevare mind. Maladetto! If I not come out of z'e buggy first, I not let any one come. You t'ink I lose all I play for, after keeping it up so long? No! Maza have the best of it; even if he be over z'e canyon, he know when he have z'e best of it."

And as a proof that he did have the best of it, the dwarf leaned out of the buggy, with the ends of the reins in his hand, as

if to strike the mare; but that he had another purpose in view was soon apparent, for he muttered:

"Maza not going to die now, but he sooner die z'an let z'em have z'e boy."

With that he stepped down upon the step of the buggy, and thence found his way to the big limb of the tree upon which the vehicle and the horse were perched in so precarious a fashion.

"Hold on, there, Maza, or you'll have the whole thing overboard," warned Silver Sam, as he saw the carriage swaying more and more.

"Nevare mind! I do z'is z'ing," was the answer.

He endeavored to lift the little fellow out of the buggy, but could not reach him from where he stood on the limb.

"Here, Aubrey! Come to me," he said, imperiously.

"Stay where you are, Aubrey!" commanded the detective, as he made his way slowly and cautiously along the limb toward the dwarf.

The child looked from one to the other in doubt. He did not recognize the detective, with his big whiskers, and thought he might as well trust to Maza as to a stranger.

Sam, divining what was passing in the boy's mind, lifted his whiskers off his face long enough for Aubrey to see his bare face.

"Mr. Wallace!" cried Aubrey, joyfully.

"Thet's right, Aubrey! You bet it's Mr. Wallace! But you ought to call him Silver Sam. Thet's ther best name fer him," put in Mug Hinckley.

The detective wasted no time in parley. If he did not secure the boy at once, the chances were that he would be killed through the malignity of the dwarf, there and then.

With a bound that might have hurled him into the awful gulf, he reached the side of the buggy, and took the boy in his arms, staggering as he did so.

"Now, Mug! Quick!" he cried.

Hinckley, who had been watching this proceeding in a state of mind bordering on frenzy, reached for the boy, and took him, just as the detective slipped off the limb and hung over the canyon, holding on by a broken branch that creaked ominously with his weight.

As Maza saw that the boy was out of his reach, he gave the mare a vicious kick, and leaped to the bank, with the detective holding to him, in a life and death grip.

The mare, struggling and kicking, slipped off the limb, with the buggy, and they could hear the crash, muffled by the distance, as the poor creature was dashed to pieces at the bottom of the canyon.

CHAPTER XXII.

HER ARCH-ENEMY AGAIN.

Let us follow Alma Moore and her companions in the wagon that Silver Sam had seen through his field-glasses just before he entered the canyon where he had the encounter with Maza on the stump of the tree.

They had followed Maza until he had entered the canyon, and then they lost track of him entirely.

"It's hall right, Mrs. Moore," remarked Bob Plympton. "Let 'im go. We'll catch 'im afore 'e gets very far. I'll think the best thing will be to push on to Sacramento, and wait for 'im. We 'as 'im dead to rights, now."

Alma Moore smiled at this confident tone of Plympton, and nodded her head in acquiescence.

"The hold man's right," said Mrs. Plympton, who had been singularly quiet during the journey. "When 'e says hanything, 'e generally knows what 'e's talking habout."

Lo Shun said nothing, but the greenish glitter in his little eyes told that he was paying close attention to all that was said in his presence.

Bob Plympton, who was driving a serviceable horse that he always kept in a private place around his hotel for his own use, touched up the animal and sent the wagon bounding over the level plain at a good round pace.

They struck the regular road that ran between Sacramento and Bull Canyon in due time, having skirted the Bull Canyon hotel by a detour of two or three miles.

"I didn't know we had passed Jim Morgan's place," remarked Alma, in some surprise, as she recognized the locality.

"Yes, I thought as it would be best to git around it," answered Bob. Then he leaned over to her and whispered: "I don't trust that Chinese cove, and I didn't want to let him get to the Bull Canyon Hotel again, just now. I'm afraid as 'e playin' inter the 'ands of Maza."

"Very likely," answered Alma. "But it does not matter much. I don't trust him. I know that Silver Sam is on the trail of Maza, and I feel confident that my child will soon be restored to me."

"I 'ope so, I am sure," responded Bob Plympton, fervently.

The rumbling of wheels down the slope that stretched behind them, and that was the exit to the gulch along which old Bill Long had sent his horses with such a dangerous experience, as related in the first chapter, caught Alma's ear.

"Is that Maza coming?" she asked, looking into Bob Plympton's face, anxiously.

Mr. Plympton took off his hat and wiped his bald head vigorously with his big red handkerchief, for he was getting hot with his exertion of driving and talking at the same time.

He replaced his hat on his head, and then, looking back into the midst of the mountains that the morning sun had not yet dispelled, answered, carelessly:

"It's nothin' but the coach goin' from Bull Canyon ter Sacramento. It 'u'd be a good thing if we could git it to stop. I guess we'd make better time than on the wagon."

"But, who would take care of the wagon?"

"Betsy. She can drive well, and there hain't no hurry for 'er to git to Sacramento, as I knows on."

A gleam of satisfaction shone in the Chinaman's green eyes, and Alma saw it.

Before she could make any comment on the proposition, however, Betsy Plympton put a veto on it in her most vigorous Cockney dialect.

"Ho, an' you think that I'd drive a yaller Chinaman all the way to Sacramento, without no one else with me? What do you think your wife is, Robert Plympton, to talk about leaving 'er in the company of a 'eathen on a lonely road for the best part of a day?"

"Lo Shun wouldn't 'urt yer."

"'Urt me? No, hof course he wouldn't. I'd like ter see hany man as could 'urt me. I wasn't never afraid of no man in hall my life, and I'm quite positive as I hain't afraid of a Chinaman. But it's the hinsult as I'll looks at—the bloomin' hinsult! I'm ashamed of you, Robert Plympton. I thought you 'ad too much respect of me, what's been your lovin' wife fer nigh on to ten years come next Michaelmas. Don't never say nothin' like that to me ag'in, Robert Plympton, hor I'll give yer a bit o' my mind. I'll can't stand heverything, you know. I'm a woman of few words, but I'll 'as my feelin's, an' I'll feel halmost as hif I must say somethin' when you says hanythin' ter me like that."

"Whew! I didn't know as I was goin' ter git this talkin' to," uttered Bob, ruefully, as he bent his head beneath the storm of his wife's eloquence. "Yes, she is a woman of a few words, hain't she?"

"I wouldn't leave Betsy with Lo Shun if I were you," put in Alma Moore, quietly.

"Hall right," answered Bob, rubbing his head harder than ever. "I don't want to do nothin' as Betsy don't like, o' course."

The Chinaman looked at Betsy furtively with an expression in his eyes that would have given that worthy woman a severe pain could looks hurt.

In the meantime the coach was bowling along toward them, its six horses making much better time than the wagon, although Bob had not slackened speed while talking.

"Git up, yer lazy cusses!" rang out a hoarse voice that they all recognized as the property of old Bill Long. "I'll cut

ther liver and lights outen yer if yer don't make er spurt! How in thunder do you s'pose I'm goin' ter git ter Sacramento on time. Git up, yer lazy coyotes! Gi—i—i—t up!"

As a matter of fact, the horses were dashing along in fine style, and old Bill Long knew it. But it was his custom to yell at them, and he did it merely from force of habit.

"Look out ahead, thar'!" he bawled, as he came sweeping down the road. "Look out, or I'll drive all over yer!"

"He means us, doesn't he?" asked Alma, looking back.

"Ho, I guess so. But hit don't make no difference. 'E's got hall the room 'e wants. Hi 'ave as much right ter part of the road as 'e 'as," replied Bob, coolly.

But he drew to one side, in spite of his defiant remark, because he knew that, in all probability, old Bill Long would try to take a wheel off him, even if he spilled the coach and threw all his passengers into the dust.

"Git up! Gi—i—i—t up!"

The horses of the coach were in a foam, but the experienced eye of Alma Moore told her that they had plenty of work in them yet, and that they would carry the coach into Sacramento without difficulty in spite of their present exertions.

There was a cloud of dust over the coach, and the people in the wagon saw that the outside passengers were white with the fine particles that had been kicked up by the wheels and the horses' hoofs.

"A good rain would be a nice thing for the coach," she observed; "but I don't see any in sight."

"No rainee for a month yet," put in Lo Shun, sententiously.

"None o' ye'r b'izness," growled Bob Plympton. "Hi don't want you ter say nothin'. You've got me into trouble enough with people 'ere halready."

Bob looked meaningly at his wife, but that lady ignored the remark.

The coach was just behind them now, and old Bill Long's face shone out red from his mass of beard, and his eyes turned toward them wrathfully as he guided his coach just a little to the left to make sure of passing the wagon without collision.

"'Allo, Bill!" cried Plympton.

Bill Long did not answer in words, but he raised his elbow with a peculiar jerk in recognition of the salutation, and his big machine swept on.

As the two vehicles were side by side for an instant Alma Moore looked at the window of the coach, and uttered a piercing shriek.

"What's the matter?" asked Betsy, seizing her arm.

"Oh, Betsy, did you see?"

"See? No, Hi didn't see nothin'."

"But he was there?"

"'E? 'Oo's 'e?"

"Me see him," chuckled the Chinaman.

"Shut up!" roared Bob Plympton.

The coach was a little ahead of the wagon now, but Bill Long slackened his horses in his avoidance of a big boulder that lay in his path, and that he skirted dexterously with the wheels of his coach, only just grazing it, instead of bumping over it.

"Oh, stop the coach, stop it, for the love of Heaven!" wailed Alma.

"It nootee stopee for the President of United States," said Lo Shun, with a grin.

"It must stop! It must!" cried Alma, wildly.

"Hello, Bill! Stop!" yelled Bob, waving his whip at old Bill Long, and then giving his horse a cut to quicken his pace.

"Stop, nothing!" bawled Bill Long. "Come ter Sacramento if yer want ter see me!"

"Oh, how cruel men can be!" wailed Alma.

"What's the matter, any'ow?" asked Bob. "Why did yer want the coach stopped?"

"Because I saw, inside the coach, looking at me through the window—my boy, Aubrey!"

"Thunder!" yelled Bob, as he gave his

horse another cut with the whip, and caused him to bound forward.

"The boy in the coach! Ho, make 'im stop, Bob, and I'll never scold you again," said Betsy, eagerly.

The coach was tearing on, ahead of them, and the wagon was doing its best to keep up with it. The window of the coach was closed, however, and it was impossible to see who was inside.

"Was the boy alone?" asked Bob.

"I don't know. I could not see. But I thought, just as the coach rushed away, that I could distinguish the face of Maza in the background, and that he pulled my boy away."

Bob Plympton stood up in the wagon and gave his horse another slash with the whip, as he yelled impatiently to him to "Gi along!"

"Put 'im halong, Bob! Don't let them git haway!" cried Betsy, excitedly. "Hi'll bet a pound hit's that naswty dwarf in the coach, an' he's takin' 'im to Sacramento, 'cause 'e thinks we won't never be hable to catch 'im there. Ho, the villain! Wouldn't Hi like to git my 'ands into 'is 'air just once. Hi'd give it to 'im!"

Alma Moore had dropped into her seat, worn out with anxiety, and she hardly looked at the coach that was just ahead of them, and that Bob Plympton was straining every nerve to catch.

"'Allo! Look there!"

It was Betsy Plympton that spoke, and she was standing up in the wagon pointing at some one in the back seat of the coach, sitting by the side of the grinning guard, who had been enjoying the pursuit, without knowing exactly what it all meant.

Alma looked, and then, pulling her pistol from her pocket, aimed it at the figure, which was muffled up in a big buffalo-skin overcoat, and a slouch hat, so that nothing could be seen of the face save a carefully-curved black mustache. If the man had whiskers, they were concealed in the coat.

"W'ot are yer goin' ter do, Mrs. Moore?" asked Bob Plympton, hastily, seizing the hand that held the pistol.

"I'm going to shoot him!" she replied, in cold, hard tones.

"No, you must not do that. If yer do the 'ole lot of bus will hall be put into jail, and what chance would we 'ave of gettin' your boy then? Wait till we git to Sacramento, and then you can 'ave hall the satisfaction you want."

"But did you see who it was?"

"No, I couldn't see. But I s'pose hit's Maza, in the coach. Still, there wouldn't be no good in shooting at 'im, ter say nothin' of the chance you'd be takin' of 'ittin' your hown boy. Consider, Mrs. Moore. Jist think a minute, an' you'll see as Hi'm right."

"You mistake me," answered Alma, struggling to get her pistol hand free. "I know Maza is on the coach, but it wasn't him that I wanted to shoot."

"'Oo then?"

But it was not necessary for Alma Moore to answer.

The figure at the back of the coach suddenly opened his big buffalo-skin coat, and revealed the big black whiskers and white teeth of her arch-enemy, Dan Duncan, the gambler!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DEAD BRINGS A MESSAGE.

Of the wild efforts of Bob Plympton to catch the coach, and of the triumphant smile that played about the cruel countenance of Dan Duncan, as he sat on the back of the coach, it is hardly necessary to speak.

It was nearing evening when old Bill Long pulled up at the hotel and discharged his passengers, and the wagon of Bob Plympton was several miles out on the plain at that time.

It had been possible for Bob Plympton to keep his horse somewhere near the coach for a few minutes, but as soon as old Bill Long made up his mind to leave his pursuer, he put the whip to his horses and sent them flying along at a pace that soon distanced the others.

When Plympton drew up at the hotel

with his wagon, it was quite dark, and Alma Moore was almost exhausted with grief and anxiety. She had not seen her boy since she had obtained that slight glimpse of him at the coach window, and her mother's heart hungered for another sight of her darling.

There was nothing to be obtained from the clerk of the hotel. He had not seen any one from the coach. No one had registered in the house that day.

"But there were passengers on the coach who got down here?" suggested Alma.

"That is an every-day occurrence, madam," answered the clerk, twisting his neat little mustache, and feeling his shirt bosom to make sure that his diamond pin was in place. "But the passengers who get down here do it because this is the stopping place of the coach. That is all. Only a very small percentage of the people that ride into Sacramento on the coach become guests of this house. If we had them all, we should do a much larger business than we do."

Alma turned away disconsolately, and, leaning on Betsy Plympton's arm, accepted her invitation to go with her to the house of a friend and get rested, preparatory to a search for her boy in the morning.

A walk of a few minutes brought them to a modest appearing frame cottage on a side street, where there were shrubs in the front garden and a veranda around the house, suggesting that the occupants understood the art of being comfortable, at least.

Betsy Plympton knocked at the door but there was no answer.

"Guess 'e's out," remarked Bob Plympton.

"Yes. 'E's a traveling man, an' hoften 'e goes haway for weeks at a time," said Betsy. "But Hi think Hi can get him."

She went into the garden, and under the veranda, in a corner, she found a key, which opened the door.

"Come hin, Mrs. Moore. Hit's hall right. This is a huncle of Betsy's as lives 'ere, and she 'as horders halways to make 'erself at 'ome whether 'e's 'ere or not."

As Bob said this, he carried out his own precepts by ensconcing himself in a big rocker as soon as he had seen Mrs. Moore comfortably seated, and asking his wife what there was in the house to eat.

Betsy bustled about, and in a surprisingly short time had made some tea, and produced a good supper of ham and eggs, with some nice fresh bread that she bought at the nearest store.

The three sat down to their meal, when suddenly Bob exclaimed, as he jumped from his chair:

"Thunderation! Where's that bloomin' Chinaman?"

Lo Shun had disappeared as soon as the wagon had stopped at the hotel, where Bob had had it taken care of by the hostler of the hotel.

"I never noticed as 'e wasn't 'ere till this 'ere blessed minute!" said Bob. "'E's hafter no good, Hi'm sure, hof that."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when there was a feeble tap at the front door, and Bob ran to see who was there, taking the precaution to draw his pistol and carry it in his hand behind his back as he went.

Even in Sacramento Bob Plympton did not feel entirely safe when he had reason to believe that Maza and Dan Duncan were both in the city.

He opened the door with a jerk and looked out. It was black night, and he could not see any one at first.

Then, as his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, he made out the figure of a man leaning against the post of the veranda, at the top of the short flight of steps that led from the garden.

"'Allo! 'Oo's there?" he asked.

The figure did not move.

"'Allo, I say!" repeated Plympton.

Still the man did not move.

"Some drunken cove, as don't know where 'e lives, I s'pose. 'Ere, git out of this!"

He ran out upon the veranda, and, seizing the shoulders of the stranger, gave him a violent shake.

The man did not resist him, but as Bob took his hands away, the stranger fell backward, his head striking the steps with a loud thump, and he rolled over on his back on the grass in the garden.

"Wow! 'E 'as a load on!" exclaimed Bob. "Wonder 'oo it is, any'ow. I'll go in and git a light."

He went inside, and calling Betsy from the kitchen, whither she had just gone for something needed for the table, returned to the veranda, shading the lamp with his hand as well as he could, to protect it from the wind.

"Wot's the matter, Bob?" asked his wife.

"Some bloke with a jag on, er-snoozin' in hour front yard," answered Bob, with as much indignation as if he really owned the place.

"Ho, there's lots of them sort of fellers in Sacramento, Bob, has you well know."

"Well, hold the light, an' I'll soon 'ave 'im out o' this."

Betsy took the lamp, and Bob, replacing his revolver in his belt, ran down the stairs, and held up the man's head so that the light of the lamp fell full upon his face.

Then he dropped him with a cry of horror.

The man was stone dead.

"Jumping Moses! Wot kind o' place 'ave we got hinto?"

"Oo his it? Do you know 'im?" asked the practical Betsy.

"Hi don't know whether I do or not. An' I don't want ter look at 'im ag'in."

"Ho! You hare a coward. 'Old the light, an' I'll look at 'im. Hi hain't afraid."

"Pr'aps you hain't, but Hi hain't hashamed to say that pins and needles hare running hall hup and down my back."

"Ho! W'y?"

"W'y?" yelled Bob, indignantly. "Wot do you think? W'en dead men come er-walkin' hup to ye'r front door and knock, an' then when you go to see wot's the bloomin' row, to 'ave them tumblin' down the stairs an' showin' their w'ite mugs to yer has bold has you please! It hain't no wonder Hi'm nervous."

For answer, Betsy pushed the lamp into her husband's trembling fingers and bent over the dead man.

Then she started back, and, in an awe-stricken tone, announced:

"Si Slack!"

Alma Moore had come out during the colloquy between Bob Plympton and his wife, and now, when she heard that Si Slack was dead, she wondered what it could all mean.

"Who could have done that?" she exclaimed. "Surely not—"

She stopped, for she felt that it would be an insinuation that she should not utter, but Betsy Plympton finished the sentence for her by saying:

"Silver Sam?"

"No, it couldn't be he," said Alma Moore, with a tone that carried conviction. "He would not kill a man without good reason, and this poor fool was not to be feared. Besides, why would he bring the body around here, to show to me?"

"Ho, no; you're right," agreed Betsy. "But 'ow do you know it was meant for you? It might be to scare my hold man. If it was meant for that, hit certainly did it," she added, with a laugh, as she saw that Bob was still trembling.

"Hi ain't so scared as Hi was," declared Bob, valiantly. "Give me a chance to look at 'im, Betsy. 'Ere, you 'old the light."

He thrust the lamp into the hand of his wife, and then, going boldly down the stairs, felt the heart and pulse of Si Slack and shook his head.

"E's dead; and, what's more, 'e's been dead some time, 'cause 'e's cold."

Si Slack was indeed cold, and he had probably been dead an hour or two when he made his ghastly visit to the house in which was the woman against whose happiness he had conspired in life.

"'Ere's wot killed 'im, too," said Bob, as he showed a bullet wound in Si Slack's shirt right over the heart. "Some one

plugged him right through the 'cart, an' they plugged 'im good."

He rose from his knees (for he had been kneeling at the dead man's side during his examination), when he uttered a cry of surprise, and knelt again.

"'Ere's something, by George!" he exclaimed.

He pushed aside the rought sack coat of the corpse, and tore away a scrap of white paper that was pinned to the shirt.

"Wot is that?" asked Betsy.

"There's some writin' on hit," answered her husband. "But I can't see to read hit. 'Morever, hit's halways 'ard for me to read writin'."

"Let me see it," said Alma.

Bob Plympton gave it to her quickly, as if glad to be rid of it, and Alma held it close to the lamp.

The writing had been done with a lead pencil, and was in a scrawling chiography that rather excused Bob Plympton's inability to decipher it.

Alma looked at it for nearly a minute before she could make anything of it. Then, having conquered one or two words, she put the rest to it and read:

"This man interfered with my plans. Keep away from Aubrey Moore for a week, or I will send him to you, with a bullet in his heart, just as I have Si Slack."

"M."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DARK EXPEDITION.

For a minute Alma stood, with the paper in her hand, positively stupefied.

It was an impressive scene.

There lay the dead man at their feet, staring straight up into the blackness of the sky, with the awful hole in his breast, and the message he had brought in the hands of the mother of the boy whose life was threatened.

Alma's face was white as that of the corpse on the ground, while her lips moved convulsively.

Betsy Plympton held the lamp perfectly still, because she did not know what to do with it, and Bob, breathing hard in his longing to get at the wretch who had penned the note, was waiting for some one to speak.

The trance into which the three people had been thrown by the awful thing at their feet was broken at last by Alma, who, with a sob of intense anguish, turned and walked into the house.

"Wot's to be done with him, Betsy?" asked Bob, for he felt that he must depend entirely for advice upon his wife, now, as he always did when anything extraordinary fell in his way.

"Hi 'ardly know," whispered Betsy.

"'E can't lay there, you know."

"No, of course 'e can't. Well, you'll jist 'ave ter move 'im, Bob. There hain't no one to 'elp you."

Bob shrank at the prospect of doing such an awful job by himself, when a voice came out of the darkness—a voice that both were unfeignedly glad to hear, although they did not care about its owner as a rule.

It was that of Lo Shun.

"Hello! Whatee you do? I looker for you evelywhere, and now you here. Lo Shun velly glad. He lost you, an' he so solly."

Lo Shun came forward from the front gate and stopped when he found the body of Si Slack lying on the ground across the entrance to the veranda.

"Hello! Whatee this? Oh, a dlead man! Whatee he doing here? He fiend of yours, Mistle Plympton?"

There was a vacant grin on Lo Shun's face that made Betsy boil within, for she believed he assumed it only to hide his feelings.

"Don't stand there, laughing like a monkey, but come up 'ere and 'elp Mr. Plympton take that body haway. D'ye hear me?" she cried, with a threatening movement, as if she would throw the lamp at the head of the Chinaman.

"Allee lightee. I flake him away. I not afraid of dead man. Who is it? Oh, thlat's funny. It old Si Slack. Me sabbe. He been and got dlunk and be shloved out

of bar-room and got hurt. He all right now, eh?"

"Carry it around to the stable at the back of the 'ouse," commanded Betsy. "You know where it is, Bob."

"Me know, too. Me flind it," put in Lo Shun, still grinning.

"Hindeed! And 'ow do you know where it is, you yaller devil?" asked Betsy, turning suddenly upon him.

Lo Shun saw that he had made a mistake, but he did not stop grinning; he was too cunning for that.

"Me often come here, whlen I in Sacklemento. I do muchee work for old Mr. World, your uncle. Sabee?"

"Hi sabee that you're a liar," answered Betsy. "But, never mind, take him away," pointing to the remains of Si Slack.

Without more ado Bob Plympton and Lo Shun carried the body around the house and laid it on the floor of the stable, that was unoccupied by horses, and was as good a place for the purpose to which it was now put as could be desired.

"What shall I do?" moaned Alma to Betsy Plympton, while the men were outside on their dismal errand. "I feel as if I must go after my boy to-night. I cannot wait."

"But suppose Maza does kill 'im," suggested Betsy. "'E probably 'as spies watching you."

"I don't care. He would never dare to harm my boy. Besides, he knows I would pay well for his return. I think he will surely let me ransom him now."

"Pr'aps. But where would you go to look for him to-night? You 'ave no hidea where 'e is, and it would be honly a wild-goose chase to go hout to-night."

"Then what shall I do?"

"Wait till the morning, and then go to the police. They'll 'elp you."

"Police!" repeated Alma, contemptuously. "What have the police ever done for me? I have tried the police over and over again since my boy was stolen, and they never assisted me in the least. They would promise all kinds of things and there it ended. No, I won't trouble the police. This is something beyond their province."

"But Silver Sam belongs to the police."

"Silver Sam! That is different. He is my personal friend, and was the personal friend of my dear dead husband. Besides, a member of the Secret Service is not to be spoken of as a common policeman. I have the greatest respect for a detective who is an intelligent man, as most detectives are, and I am willing to trust them to the very end. But, where is Silver Sam?"

"Here!"

With a shriek of joy Alma Moore sprang to her feet and clung to Silver Sam, who had entered the room unobserved, and had heard the last remark of Alma Moore just in time to reply to it.

"Where—where did you come from?"

"It makes little difference where I came from. I am here now, and I think I know enough about Maza's schemes to foil him this time."

"How?"

"Would you object to my taking some supper before I go any further?" asked Silver Sam, with a smile. "I assure you nothing can be done for a couple of hours, so I shall not be wasting valuable time."

"Hof course you shall 'ave some supper, Sam—the best the 'ouse haffords," answered Betsy, hospitably, as she bustled away to the kitchen.

"Betsy!"

"Well, Sam?"

"Lo Shun is outside with your husband?"

"Yes."

"Don't let the Chinaman know that I am here."

"Why?"

"I have a good reason."

"Hof course you 'ave. You halways 'ave good reasons for heverything you say. Hi know that."

She ran out to the front of the house and met the Chinaman and her husband at the foot of the veranda steps.

"Bob, you and Lo Shun go right up-

stairs to the front room and stay there. Mrs. Moore is not well, and I do not want 'er disturbed for a while. She is taking a doze in 'er chair."

"Hall right, Betsy. But w'ot about supper?"

"I'll bring supper hup to both hof you. I suppose Lo Shun is 'ungry."

"Me velly hungly," said the Chinaman, with a grin.

The two men went up-stairs, but Lo Shun hung back a little in the endeavor to hear and see something in the front parlor. Bob gave him a vicious shove.

"Git hup there, you yaller rascal! W'ot are yer tryin' ter find hout?"

"I notee tlying to find out any'ing. I wantee my slupper."

Lo Shun's suspicions were aroused, not because there was anything to make him suspicious, that he could see, but simply that he was always suspicious, and he was looking for he knew not what.

Supper was discussed, and then, at Alma Moore's request, Silver Sam lighted a cigar and settled down for an hour's quietude.

He did not say anything about what was to be done that night for the benefit of Alma Moore, but she knew that he had a plan in his head that he would carry out when the time came. He had told her that nothing could be done for two hours, and she was waiting with as much patience as she could command.

Only once she asked him a direct question about it when she said:

"Sam, do you think I shall see my boy to-night?"

"Yes," he responded, briefly, and then he puffed away at his cigar in silence with an air of intense enjoyment.

At last he arose, and telling Mrs. Moore to put on a bonnet and wrap, and Betsy to do likewise, he walked up-stairs to the front room, where Bob Plympton and the Chinaman were sitting opposite each other, smoking cigars that Bob had provided, with Bob watching every movement of the Chinaman, and prepared to brain him should he show any signs of treachery.

The detective pushed the door open, and, with the stump of his nearly-consumed cigar still between his lips, walked up to Lo Shun and clapped him heavily on the shoulder.

"Mistlee Silver Sam!" gasped Lo Shun, evidently as surprised as if the detective had arisen from the dead.

Sam had got rid of his whiskers and was dressed in a neat business suit similar to that in which he was first introduced to the reader. He wore nose-glasses, and altogether was as innocent-appearing a young man as one could expect to find in a long day's walk—or ride, either, for that matter.

"Yes, Lo Shun, here I am. You are going over to meet Maza again, now, aren't you? Won't you be late if you don't start right away?"

The Chinaman half rose from his chair, as if he contemplated making a dart from the room, but Bob Plympton pushed him back again, and looked at Silver Sam for further orders.

Bob had known Silver Sam for years, and was not surprised at his turning up in this fashion, because, as he often said, he could not be astonished at anything Silver Sam did.

"I notee going to see Maza. He velly bad man."

"I agree with the last part of your remark. He is a very bad man. But when you say that you are not going to see him, you simply lie. If you don't tell me the truth, I'll put your head in a tub of water and keep it there," said the detective, calmly.

"I notee—" began the Chinaman.

"I mean what I say," interrupted Silver Sam.

"Shall I duck 'im?" asked Bob, with an eagerness that promised the operation would be well performed if it were given to him.

"Never mind, Bob. Lo Shun will obey me, I have no doubt, and it will not be necessary to use the tub now."

"No, I do whatee you say."

"I know you will. Now, you will walk in front of me just ten feet—no more and no less—and go straight to the crib where Maza and Dan Duncan are."

The Chinaman started and looked at the detective as if he thought him gifted with supernatural powers.

"Me thought you was a long way off, up in the mountains," murmured the Chinaman.

"Of course you did," answered the detective, with a smile. "But I wasn't. Now, you know what you have to do. Do it."

Lo Shun jumped up hastily, and had reached the door before Bob Plympton seized him again.

"Old on, Lo Shun. Wait till the gov'nor says you are to go."

"Allee lightee."

"Just keep him with you for a minute, Bob. Bring him down-stairs and take him to the veranda until I come out."

Bob Plympton obeyed by taking Lo Shun by the shoulder, and steering him down the stairs to the veranda, where he held him until Silver Sam came out with Alma Moore.

"Now, Bob, march," said Silver Sam.

Bob walked along with Lo Shun, ten feet in front of the detective and Alma Moore, and the procession went swiftly along the dark streets on an expedition that might end in the death of the boy, for anything his mother could tell.

"Heaven preserve my child!" she said to herself as she moved along with one hand grasping the detective's arm and the other grasping her pistol in her pocket.

CHAPTER XXV.

TWO PRISONERS.

In a tall house, in a dark corner of Sacramento, Maza and Dan Duncan sat facing each other.

They were in a room on the top floor, and the sloping ceiling showed that it was an attic. The door was fastened with two bolts, and a big key in the lock was probably turned to add to the security of the room.

On a cot bed in a corner was the boy Aubrey, lying with his eyes open, and evidently wide awake. He did not look particularly frightened, nor was he in that dazed condition that appeared to overwhelm him in Bob Plympton's house the day before.

"Aubrey," said Duncan, not unkindly.

"Yes, sir."

"Can't you go to sleep?"

"I don't feel very sleepy."

"Well, you should, for it's nearly one o'clock in the morning, and you will have a journey to-morrow most likely."

"Where are we going?"

"Wait and see. Now try to go to sleep."

"And shall I soon see mamma?"

"If you behave yourself. Now go to sleep."

The child obediently turned over on his little bed, and with his face to the wall, tried to do as he was told. He did not know whether Duncan was telling him the truth, but he wanted to believe it, and he was willing to wait until to-morrow to find out. He was very tired of the life he had been compelled to lead lately, and the short time he had spent with his mother made him long all the more to be with her altogether.

There was a single lamp on the table in the middle of the room, and at this table Duncan sat examining a letter written on official foolscap paper, with a scroll head comprising the word "Police," with other matter.

Duncan was neatly dressed. He had trimmed his whiskers, and his frock-coat and white shirt front indicated that he had found some means of rearranging his costume since the time that he was seen, with ghastly face, looking at Lionel Bolton, in the room at Bob Plympton's place at Tahoe.

"So," he muttered, "the police think they can get the best of Dan Duncan, do they?"

He smiled sneeringly, and read the letter carefully from beginning to end, once more.

The reader possesses a privilege not en-

joyed by any one else—of being able to look over Dan Duncan's shoulder, and reading the letter. It was as follows:

"Police Headquarters,

"Sacramento, Cal., Sept. 16, 18—.

"Your whereabouts are known, and the department has the ability to take your person at any moment. In consideration of services rendered by you in the past, in the way of revealing the hiding place of members of the Red Bluff gang, and bringing them to justice, it is the desire of the police department to shield you as much as possible. It cannot overlook all your acts, however, and it requests that you give yourself up at once, that your case may be arranged in some way. You may be sure that your punishment will be made as light as possible, as recompense for your services to the authorities in the matter of the Red Bluff gang.

"If you do not come to Police Headquarters by nine o'clock to-morrow morning, you will be taken by officers and brought here by force. This is the last warning.

"WILSON, Chief."

"Take me by force, eh? I should like to see them do it."

The ugly sneer that was so common to the face of Dan Duncan crept over his countenance again, and he twisted the paper into a ball and shoved it into his pocket contemptuously.

"Well, I shall stay here for a few days, and I think this will bring to an end my long contest with Alma Moore. I can prove that I am legally married to her. And then she can have her boy, and I can have her and the money scraped up by that fool of a first husband of hers."

He started as a slight tap was heard at the door.

He waited, and the tap was repeated three times.

"The signal! But I should like to know if it is all right," he muttered. "That Chinaman is not to be trusted, and he has the whole scheme in his mind, I believe."

He stole softly to the door, and then went back to the table, and turned the lamp down as low as possible without actually putting it out.

Then he groped his way to the door and noiselessly shot back the two bolts, which had evidently been oiled and fixed generally so that they would not creak or make a noise. He turned the key in the same way, and then knelt down and opened the door softly about an inch.

There was an iron catch in the floor that he pulled up when he knelt, and the door was as firmly secured now as when it was quite closed, but it enabled him to whisper to the person outside without exposing himself, in case it should happen to be an enemy.

A low whistle saluted him, followed by a wheezy cough.

Duncan answered this by emitting a hardly audible hiss.

"All right, Bob."

It was Maza's voice.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"All well?"

"All well."

Without further parley, Duncan opened the door, and the dwarf slipped into the room, closing the door immediately, and slipping the bolts back into their places, while Duncan turned the key.

Maza then staggered to the middle of the room, and, turning up the lamp, sank into a chair, apparently exhausted.

"What's the matter? Did you fix Slack as I told you?"

"Yes. He was all right."

"Did she read the paper?"

"Yes."

"What did she do?"

"Went inside, and then I came away."

"That was all you saw?"

"Ye—yes."

"Eh?"

Duncan's voice was sharp, and Maza knew at once that his companion did not believe him.

"I—I—mean that I came away as soon as I saw Lo Shun."

Duncan started, and looked Maza straight in the eyes.

"So that Chinaman went there, eh?"

"Yes. You knew he was to do it, to keep watch on them all."

"I did not know it."

"I told you."

Maza was reputed to be absolutely fearless, but it could not be denied that he stood in great awe of this cold-blooded Dan Duncan, who had killed so many men, and who thought no more of removing a human being than he would of shooting a mad dog."

"Did you go to police headquarters?"

"Yes."

"How are things there? All safe?"

"Quite safe. Maladetto! Why should z'ey not be safe? What can z'e police do? Bah! I spit on z'e police!"

Maza never got so violent as when he thought of the police, his natural enemies, who had been trying for years to find a case against this miserable dwarf, but who had been foiled by him entirely so far.

"They would not send me such a letter as this without something to back it up," observed Duncan, musingly, as he pulled the crumpled letter from his pocket, and tossed it from one hand to the other.

"Z'e police are full of z'e bluff. You should know z'at by this time."

"Perhaps you are right, Maza. Where is this Chinaman now?"

"He is in z'e house of z'e old man Ward, where z'e others are now. He vill be all right. I don't think he would dare to do anything dirty now. If he did, I squ—e—eze his head between my knee an' z'e floor till he die slowly—oh, so slowly!" hissed the dwarf.

The fiendish malignity with which he said this made Dan Duncan turn around to look at him, and a hard, dry laugh came from him as he saw how thoroughly in earnest Maza was.

"If ther yaller devil does anything that ain't squar', I'll let you take him first, and I'll fix him afterward, Maza," he said, smilingly, as he replaced the crumpled letter in his pocket.

"He vill be fixed before you get him."

"Yes, I guess he will, from what you say. However, that doesn't matter. What about our interesting prisoners? I suppose it would be well to go and look at them, eh?"

"Yes. I like to see z'em. Ha, ha! It vas a good idea to tie z'em up together. Z'ey love each ozz'er so much."

They looked at the boy, who was fast asleep, now, and then the dwarf crept to the one window, which was closely boarded up, so that not a ray of light could escape to warn people in the street that the room was occupied.

"Careful, there, Maza," said Dan Duncan. "If any of those bloodhounds of police are on the watch, we shall be given away, sure, if we show a light."

Maza did not condescend to answer, as he turned the lamp down to the lowest possible spark, and then moved a board at the window just enough to give him a peep-hole.

"No one z'ere. Z'e saloon down-stairs is still open, and d'ere is a noise in d'ere, as usual. But everyt'ing is safe."

He closed the window shutter, and brought a folding ladder from under the cot-bed. The ladder he leaned against the wall in a corner, and then, with a look of invitation to Duncan, went up, and pushed aside a small trap in the ceiling, showing a dark hole.

A moment later, and another trap-door above was pushed open, and the cold air of the night came blowing through, while the glistening stars shone through the opening, and told that the weather was as clear and beautiful as it generally is in California.

When the two men stood on the roof, Duncan carefully closed the two trap-doors, and then stood still to listen.

The house upon which they stood was next to the corner, and there was a long stretch of buildings in two directions, with chimney stacks of all shapes and sizes standing, gaunt and ghost-like, on every side.

"This is a pleasant place for a smoke, I think," observed Duncan, as he took a cigar from his pocket, and, lying down be-

hind a pile of chimneys, lighted a match and set his cigar going.

Then he sat down on the roof, with his back against a big chimney, and composed himself for a smoke.

"Vell, you are a cool fellow," said Maza, with some admiration in his tone, but impatiently, too.

"Not at all, Maza. But I couldn't smoke down-stairs, in that room, and my constitution requires tobacco at certain times in the day. So I take my smoke now."

It was noticeable that, in talking to Maza, Dan Duncan did not use the Western dialect that he affected at most times, and that he was altogether more refined in his manner than he was as a rule.

The explanation is a peculiar one. He was about to meet Alma Moore, as he fondly hoped, before long, and he wanted to make himself as desirable in speech, appearance and demeanor as possible. This accounts for his having got himself up in the neat fashion in which he was first introduced to the reader, and which was not as he has been shown in his ghastly adventure in Bob Plympton's house at Tahoe.

For ten minutes Duncan sat and smoked. Then he arose, with his cigar in his mouth, and Maza, who had been standing in the shadow of the chimneys, awaiting his pleasure, moved expectantly.

"Where are these fellows?" asked Duncan, carelessly.

"Here," and Maza pointed to a pile of chimneys at the edge of the roof, between the house they were on and the next, and, as the new moon at the moment broke over the edge of a fleecy bank of clouds, its faint light fell full upon the face of a man, who was lying on his back, tied hand and foot.

The moon came forth a little more, so as to escape the clouds altogether, and shone on another face by its side.

Two men, bound together, were lying helpless on the roof. They were Mug Hinckley and Lionel Bolton.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CAUGHT.

Duncan strolled over to the prisoners, and looked down at them with a cynical smile.

"Say, you fellers hev' made blamed fools o' ye'selves; do yer know it?" he asked, in his rough dialect. "Yer didn't think ez yer could git away with Dan Duncan, did yer? Why, all that fake at Plympton's place wuz put on by myself. It wuz easy enough done, with the help of electricity, and other scientific fakes w'ot I l'arned from Maza, hyar. An' you thought ez you wuz foolin' me. Wal, I'm sorry fer yer. I'm sorry fer yer."

He stirred them up with his foot, and laughed outright as he saw how securely they were tied.

"Wal, I guess you'll jist lay hyar till yer starve ter death," he went on. "We air goin' ter git out o' this in er few hours, with ther boy, and you kin jist stay hyar till some one finds yer. Ther police air mighty smart men, an' they may come moseying up hyar lookin' fer things, an' stumble ag'in' yer. Then you'll be all right. If they don't happen ter find yer, why, I don't think you'll hev' er very pleasant time of it."

"Say, Dan," cried Lionel Bolton, faintly. "This ain't no way ter treat one of yer own gang."

"What gang?" asked Duncan, with sudden fierceness.

"Ther Red Bluff gang."

Duncan ran to the prostrate man and kicked him savagely.

"What?" he yelled. "You'll talk ter me about that Red Bluff gang, when you an' ther rest of them sneakin' hounds turned me out of it, without no reason. You worked all ye'r silly hocus-pocus on me, an' made er blamed fool of me, ez well ez beat me out o' my rights in ther society. And now yer ask me ter let up on yer 'cause yer done it. Yes, I will. Why, Lionel Bolton, ther's ther very thing I want ter get even with yer on, to say nothin' of yer making a conspiracy to steal my boy—"

"Your boy?"

"Yes, my boy. Aubrey Moore is my boy, because I'm his mother's husband, ez you know."

"Yes, I know," repeated Lionel Bolton, with a peculiar emphasis that Dan Duncan could not quite understand.

"Wal, ther's ernough. I ain't got no more ter say. How's this hyar other rooster?"

He bent down to look at Mug Hinckley, and found that that worthy was not unconscious or asleep, as he had suspected at first, but was, on the contrary, very wide-awake and taking everything in with a great deal of interest.

"Wal, Mug, things hez kind er turned ag'in' yer this time, eh? Yer see it don't pay ter interfere with other people's business."

"Shut up," growled Mug, shortly.

"What's that? Do you know ez I hev' ther drop on yer, an' ther I could chuck you off this hyar roof in er minute if I wanted ter?" demanded Duncan, angrily.

"Chuck erway, ef yer want ter. But yer can't control my tongue, I want yer ter understand."

"Oh, yes, I could, if I tried. I could shove er chunk o' wood between ye'r teeth, an' yer 'would be ez dumb ez er clam."

"Wal, p'raps yer could. But yer couldn't purvent me thinkin', anyhow."

"Oh, I don't see why I'm er-talkin' ter yer at all. It's only wastin' time," said Duncan, impatiently. "Think all yer went ter. It don't hurt nothin', arter all."

"Thet's so," put in Lionel Bolton, anxious to curry favor with Duncan.

"It hurts me so," said Maza, with a snarl. "Maladetto! If I was Duncan, I not take any talk from you at all. I think you no good, an' I would kill you now—now."

"See if they are tied all right, and then come erway, Maza. I'm goin' down ter meet my wife, an' I can't spare no more time up hyar."

"Ye'r wife? Who's ye'r wife?" bawled Mug.

Duncan had turned half away. He looked down at Mug Hinckley, as if undecided whether to answer him or give him a tremendous kick. But he was as sharp as a steel trap, and he had suspected Mug Hinckley's secret regard for Alma Moore already. This was too good an opportunity to inflict mental pain to be passed over unheeded, so he bent down and hissed:

"Alma Moore is my wife, and she is quite happy in knowing that she does hold that honorable position."

"Yer lie!" shrieked Mug, struggling violently, but utterly unable to loosen his bonds in the slightest.

Dan Duncan knelt on the chest of the prostrate man with all the force he could, and as Mug groaned and gasped for the breath that his foe had knocked out of him, Duncan continued, in low, biting accents:

"See hyar, Mug Hinckley, it don't make no difference to you who my wife is. But I don't like ter see a low-down feller like you express his disapproval with anything I do. If yer say another word ter me erbout this hyar thing, I'll drive a bowie-knife inter yer right now, an' settle ye'r hash fer this world without any more waste o' time. An' you know ez I'm er man o' my word."

Mug Hinckley did know it, and he held his peace, although his thoughts were seething so that his brain seemed as if it would burst.

Maza had been examining the bonds, and Duncan turned to go away, but stopped.

"Say, Bolton," he remarked, suavely.

"Yes."

"Yer know Si Slack?"

"Yes."

"He's dead."

Lionel Bolton would probably have jumped, if he had not been so securely bound. As it was, he could only heave his shoulders to express his astonishment.

"How did he die?"

"He lied."

With this brief and perhaps unsatisfactory explanation, Duncan disappeared, followed by Maza, who could not resist the

pleasure of bestowing a parting kick upon Mug Hinckley, however.

For a few minutes after their captors had gone the two prisoners lay still, each busy with his own thoughts. They hated each other cordially, but now that they were companions in misery they realized that it would be for their mutual benefit to bury the hatchet temporarily.

"Say, Mug," whispered Lionel, after thinking what could be done to get them out of their predicament.

"Say it."

"Air yer with me in er scheme ter git out o' this?"

"Thet's w'ot I'm hyar fer."

"Yer don't like me, I know?"

Lionel put this in the form of a question, but he really needed no answer.

"In plain words, an' man ter man, I don't," replied Mug, uncompromisingly.

"Good! I like er man ter come right out honest an' say w'ot he means."

"Thet's my style."

"Do yer want to know what I think o' you?"

"If yer like," answered Mug, carelessly. "I know it won't be complimentary."

"It won't. I think ez you air ther meanest man in seven States, an' if we ever git out o' this, I'm goin' ter try ter git ther drop on yer, and then I'll clean yer off ther earth."

Mug Hinckley laughed. Lionel Bolton could hardly have said anything that would excite his admiration more than this plain statement of enmity, without any beating about the bush. Mug Hinckley liked a straightforward man, gruff as he was.

"Wal, Lionel, I believe ez you air squar', an' I don't bear no malice 'cause yer wants ter take my scalp. In ther mean time, it seems ter me ez we'd better work well ter-gether ter git out o' this snarl, so ez we we kin go er-poppin' at each other like gentlemen. W'ot d'yer say?"

"How air yer tied?"

"Hands behind."

"Same ez me. Wal, can't we screw ourselves so ez one of us kin untie ther other. Then ther other feller kin take his ropes off. Do yer ketch ther idea?"

"I ketch it," answered Mug. "cause I'm purty quick at readin' riddles, but it wuz rather hard ter foller ye'r talk erbout this feller an' ther other feller. Hows'ever, drive erhead. Will you untie me, or shall I tackle you?"

Without waiting for an answer, Mug Hinckley tried to get at the knots that were fastened around his companion's wrists, but found, after several efforts, that he could not reach them.

"It ain't no use, Lionel. I can't git at them. You'll hev' ter tackle me first. Can yer reach my wrists?"

"Yes; they are right in front of my hands."

"All right. Pick ther knots apart, and do it right quick, too."

Lionel had been placed facing Mug Hinckley's back, and the two men were bound together with several yards of rope around their bodies. It will thus be seen that Mug Hinckley would have little opportunity of getting at Lionel, while Lionel could work at his companion's wrists without difficulty.

"How does it go?" asked Mug, when Lionel had been poking at him for some minutes.

"Kind o' hard. Thet thar' Maza fixed up this hyar knot, an' he hez been er sailor, yer know. He makes a awful hard knot when he tries ter do it."

"Wal, work at it. It's the only chance we hev'."

Lionel pulled and tugged at the rope, but he found it an awful task. The rope had been wetted, and now it had swelled so that it was almost impossible to loosen the knots.

"I wish I hed er knife."

"I hev' one in my pocket on ther right-hand side. Kin yer git at it ef I turn over er little?"

Mug managed to wriggle a little so that Lionel Bolton's hand could almost reach the tronsers pocket, where Mug could feel the knife had been left by Maza and Duncan, although he was surprised that they

had not taken it when they got him into their power.

Lionel tugged and strained, and at last, with a mighty effort, that caused the ropes around his wrists to eat into the flesh as if they were red-hot wires, got his fingers on the hilt of the knife in his companion's pocket.

"Pull away," said Mug, encouragingly.

Another great effort, and out came the knife.

"Now, slash erway, and we'll hev' ther best of them fellers below, ez sure ez we air hyar."

Lionel had the edge of the keen knife against the ropes, and was just about to slash away, as Mug had suggested, when he paused.

An idea had crossed his brain that he felt called for discussion.

"Say, Mug, when I've cut ther ropes and let you up, what guarantee hev' I thet you won't go erway an' leave me?"

"Say, Lionel, you've known me an' heard of me in Californy fer ten years. Did ye ever hear of me doin' dirt on any one? Didn't I allers give any one I've killed er fair fight? Do yer think I'm goin' back on me principles now? I tell yer, Lionel Bolton, if you an' me wuz both standing up hyar on ther roof, with weapons in our hands, you'd find ye'rself with er fight on ye'r hands thet would hev' ter be settled afore anything else. Now, cut them ropes, an' don't talk blamed foolishness."

There was the ring of truth in Mug Hinckley's tones, and Lionel recognized it.

"I beg ye'r pardon, Mug," he said, almost humbly.

"Cut them ropes," was Mug Hinckley's sole response.

With one dexterous slash Mug Hinckley was free as to his hands, and two more slashes took off the ropes that bound the men together.

Lionel placed the knife in the hands of his companion, and Mug promptly released Lionel.

The two men stood side by side, and shook themselves to restore the circulation of the blood.

"What weapons hev' yer, Lionel?" asked Mug, in a cautious whisper, as they stood in the shadow of the chimney stack.

"I hev' er knife in my boot. I couldn't reach it while I wuz lyin' tied up."

"Thet's all right. Draw ye'r knife an' foller me!"

They had made one step forward, when each man found himself in the arms of a man, who pinned his elbows to his side with an iron grip.

CHAPTER XXVII.

READY FOR A DESPERATE TUG.

Mug Hinckley and Lionel Bolton were desperate men.

When they found themselves so unexpectedly in the hands of new enemies they struggled with almost superhuman power to free themselves.

"Let go, yer or'nary cuss!" hissed Lionel, scarcely knowing what he said.

There was no answer from his unseen antagonist, who was behind him, having jumped upon his back.

Lionel struggled hard to get around so that he could face the stranger, and at least enjoy the satisfaction of seeing whom he was engaging, but the stranger just as strenuously labored to prevent it.

As Lionel gave a mighty tug he overreached himself a little and stumbled.

It was a fatal movement for him, for his assailant, with a dexterous twist, put out his foot and tripped Lionel as neatly as anything of the kind could be done, so that the two men were lying flat on the roof, with Lionel underneath and utterly helpless.

In the mean time Mug Hinckley found himself held so tightly by his man that he could not do anything to help himself. Every twist and turn he made was met by a similar movement on the part of the demon who had him in his grip, and it seemed as if the contest must be prolonged indefinitely.

Suddenly, as the two men were turned toward the moonlight, Mug's assailant caught sight of his face, and, dropping his

arms to his side, he stepped back and exclaimed:

"Mug Hinckley, by all that's comical!"

"Silver Sam!"

There was genuine pleasure, as well as surprise, in Mug Hinckley's tone as he recognized the detective.

"What are you doing here, Mug?" asked Silver Sam.

"I am not doing anything now. I was caught by thet cussed Maza and Dan Duncan, and they brought me up hyar, an' tied me to ther captain of ther Red Bluff gang—thet Lionel Bolton what yer see lying thar', and put me up on this hyar roof ter die."

"There was no reason for your staying here that I could see. You and Bolton were just about to leave the place, apparently, when Bob Plympton and I turned up."

"Is thet Bob Plympton thar', wrestling with Bolton?"

"Where's ye'r bloomin' eyes? Carn't yer see it's Bob Plympton? This covey is a-tryin' all 'e can ter git haway, an' I'll blowed hif I'll can 'old 'im much longer, Sam!"

Bob Plympton took part in the conversation in this way, and the efforts he made to look up at the detective and at the same time keep his grip on Lionel Bolton were most ludicrous.

Silver Sam stepped to the side of the two men lying flat and hugging each other, although not in affection.

"Look here, Lionel Bolton, what do you mean ter do when you get out of this?" asked Silver Sam.

"Do? Nothing. What should I do?"

"I am half inclined to give you a chance," continued the detective. "You know I have the Red Bluff gang dead to rights, and that I mean to put the whole gang in State's Prison. I have a notion that you are not so bad as some of them, and I may make a difference in your case."

"What do yer mean by givin' me er chance?" asked Bolton.

"Well, you are here to steal Alma Moore's boy, I suppose?"

"Not exactly. I fell in with Dan Duncan and thet cussed dwarf, an' they fooled me inter believin' ez they had er squar' deal fer me ter go inter. Then, when they found ez I wouldn't go ther whole thing with them, they shoved me up hyar, with Mug Hinckley, that they hed caught prowlin' around the house."

Lionel Bolton had said all this with some difficulty, for Bob Plympton was holding him down, although he relieved the pressure on his chest a little to enable him to speak.

"Let him get up, Bob," said Silver Sam.

"I'm bloomin' well glad to do it," responded Plympton, as he arose and watched Lionel Bolton do likewise.

Bolton stood quite still, and, indeed, there was no occasion for Bob to hold his pistol ready for action, for Lionel had no intention of trying to go away.

"Now, the situation is this, Lionel," said the detective, quietly. "We know that Alma's boy is in the room just under our feet, and we intend to have him."

"Thet's ther talk," commented Mug, nodding his head, sagaciously.

"If you want to help us get him, I'll take you into the party," continued the detective.

"It's er go!" broke in Lionel Bolton, enthusiastically.

"Wait a minute before you speak. Dan Duncan and Maza are both desperate, because we have been gradually drawing in on them, and they know that this is the last stand they can make. I have the police of Sacramento at my back now, and if they were to run to Frisco they would find that the police there are on my side."

"Police? What good are they?" put in Mug Hinckley.

"I know all about what you kin say?" said Lionel Bolton. "And I want ter go inter ther scheme. I've got er score ag'in thet thar' dwarf and Dan Duncan, an' I mean ter wipe it out. If I can't go inter this hyar thing with you, I'll do it by myself, if I am shot for it."

"Try that trap-door," said the detective,

cutting the conversation short, and showing by this command that he accepted the help of Lionel Bolton without further question.

Bolton went to the trap-door that led to the room below, and up which Dan Duncan and Maza had come, and reported that it was fastened tightly.

"There is another way of getting in, but it will be attended with a great deal of risk," said the detective.

"Risk is what I want," was the reply of Bolton. "I should like ter hev' er good old-time scrap. It would make me feel ez if I wuz some use in ther world, an' I know, the way I feel now, that I should git away with ten Dan Duncans and Mazas."

Silver Sam smiled at this enthusiastic declaration on the part of the ex-captain of the Red Bluff gang, and then unfolded his plan.

"If we were to go up the stairs and break in the door, those two men would kill the boy rather than let him be taken. That I know. The only way to do is to surprise them, and get them before they know what has happened."

"You're bloomin' well right," observed Bob Plympton, while Mug Hinckley nodded his head gravely, in acquiescence.

"Down by the side of the one window in that room, on the outside wall, there is an iron water-pipe. It is fastened securely to the wall because it is intended to serve other purposes besides the mere carrying away of the waste water from the roof."

"I know, I know," exclaimed Lionel Bolton, eagerly. "And you want some one to climb down that pipe and break inter ther winder. Isn't that ther racket?"

"Yes, I—"

"Hooray!" broke in Hinckley. "I'm ther boy ter do it, too. Watch me git down thar!"

He made a jump for the edge of the roof as he spoke, but Silver Sam held him back.

"Not so fast, Mug! The first thing is to find out whether they are in there. Somebody must climb down the pipe and peep through a crack in the shutter. There is one crack that I know of near the top. Now—"

"That is hall right, Sam, but where do Hi come in?" grumbled Plympton. "It is hall very well these coves sayin' that they will climb down the bloomin' pipe, but Hi think Hi 'ave as much right to go as they 'ave."

"If you don't stop quarreling about it, I won't let any of you do it. I'll go myself," declared Sam, with a half-smile at the anxiety of these three men to undertake a feat that was as likely as not to result in an awful death, either from falling into the street, sixty feet below, or being shot by the desperadoes inside the room, when unable to even return their fire.

"Wal, that's all right. Who's ter go? I'm willin' ter abide by ther decision of ther cheer," said Mug, who knew that Sam would have his own way about the matter.

"I'm inclined to let Lionel Bolton try it, because I want to show him that I trust him," announced the detective.

"You bet you kin trust me," responded Bolton, earnestly. "I'll do whatever I'm told, and if I don't bring them fellers ter time it won't be fer want of tryin'."

"Go down, then, and put your feet on the window ledge. Then you will find your eyes just level with the crack in the shutter, and you can see how the land lies."

Bolton needed no second instruction. He swung himself easily over the eaves, and the three men above watched him as he let himself down by the iron pipe, which was just big enough to enable him to get a good grip on it.

In a few moments he was standing on the window ledge, looking into the room.

"Well?" whispered Silver Sam.

"They've both gone ter sleep in chairs at ther back of ther room, with their backs to ther window."

"Then how do you know they are asleep, if you can't see their faces?"

"Because they are both quite sure, an' they are not ther men ter be still if they

wuz awake. Hows'ever, I kin stand hyar fer erwhile an' see whether they move. Wouldn't that be er good scheme?"

"Very good."

For at least five minutes Bolton stood on the ledge, staring into the attic, while the three men on the roof waited for developments.

At the end of that period Silver Sam made a move.

"You stand thar' till we git inter ther room through the door," said Mug Hinckley, repeating to Bolton the message given to him by the detective. "Bob Plympton will stay on the roof behind one of ther chimneys, an' if ther fellers try to git away by comin' up hyar he will know what ter do with them."

"But suppose they try ter git out of this hyar window while I'm standin' on ther ledge?"

"Shoot them, that is all!" returned Sam, looking over the edge of the roof. "Hold tight to the pipe, and you can swing off if they push open the shutter. Then they will never expect to find any one out there, and you kin blaze away at them just as you please."

"All right. That's er go! Set ther thing in motion. I'll keep my eye on 'em hyar. All you hev' ter do is to git inter ther door, and we'll hev' them dead ter rights!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LO SHUN'S LAST CHANCE.

This was the critical moment.

Bolton braced himself against the window, holding tightly to the iron water-pipe, while the others set themselves to find another way into the house, besides going down through the trap which led directly into the room.

Silver Sam had come up through a scuttle communicating with the adjoining house, but had noticed a door on the landing below which he believed led to the house wherein was the attic occupied by Duncan, Maza and the boy.

In a few moments the three searchers stood on the landing, while Silver Sam forced the door open with a dexterous manipulation of his bowie-knife on the lock.

It was quite dark, but the detective was used to working without light, and it took him hardly any time to get into the other house from the landing.

The three men examined their revolvers and were ready for anything when the detective put his shoulder against the door and told his two companions to follow his example.

He knew that the door had two bolts and a lock, and that it would take a very hard shove to break it in, but he did not fear for the result.

"Now, boys! One, two, three! Shove!"

With a mighty effort all three pressed on at the door, when, to their astonishment, the door suddenly gave way and the three tumbled headlong into the room, and lay, a squirming heap, on the floor.

Silver Sam was on his feet in an instant, his pistol in his hand, and his eyes roaming around to look for the occupants of the room.

Not a soul was there besides themselves!

Instantly Wallace ran to the two chairs near the table, and pulled away the clothes piled up on them that Bolton had mistaken for Maza and Dan Duncan.

"A trick!" shouted the detective, mad with disappointment and chagrin.

"A bloomin' plant!" yelled the Englishman.

Hinckley did not say anything, but went over to the cot on which the boy had been lying not long before, and placed his hand upon it.

"They haven't been gone long. This bed is yet warm!" he said.

"Mug, you're a great man. I didn't give you credit for so much gumption," declared the detective, taking the hand of Mug in his own, and giving it a hearty squeeze.

Silver Sam admired smartness, wherever he found it.

"Down to the street!" he cried, leading the way. "We will have them yet."

"And if we do, they'll know it," added Mug, as he followed.

The three had but reached the door, when a voice outside that they all recognized, cried:

"Where is he? My boy! my boy!"

"Alma!" shouted Sam Wallace.

"Alma!" repeated Mug, as he stroked his whiskers, and wondered, even at that exciting moment, whether he was looking neat and attractive.

Alma Moore, taking no notice, rushed to the cot, but only to discover that it was empty, and stood, looking from one to the other, with an expression of disappointment on her countenance that was pitiful to see.

"My boy! My boy! Where is he?" she moaned.

"Ther bed is warm," exclaimed Hinckley, not considering that it might be unwise to excite her more.

At which Sam frowned at him, but the mischief was done.

"Oh, yes. It is, isn't it? Where is my boy—my Aubrey? He cannot be far away. You know you said, Sam, that he was in this room, and you never deceived me yet."

"And I never will," he answered, fervently.

"But where is he now? He cannot be out of the house. Ah! What is this—another room?"

She ran to the shuttered window, which had no glass in it, the wooden shutters forming its only means of closing it.

"Wait, Alma!" shouted Silver Sam.

But she heeded him not, for, with a desperate effort, she pushed open the shutters and the two blinds fell with a crash to the stones of the street!

But, hark! What was that? It was not only the crash of wood upon the cobblestones far below, but something that fell with a dull sound, which startled every one in the room.

With a look of horror Silver Sam ran to the window, and looked out. Then he came back and motioned to Mug Hinckley and the others.

Both men left the room hurriedly, and Alma gazed into the face of the detective as if asking him what he meant by his horrified look.

"What is it, Sam?"

"Nothing."

"Yes, there is something. Surely—surely, it cannot be—oh! no, that would be too horrible!"

She sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands, unable to finish the sentence.

"No; it is not what you think," assured Wallace, bending over her, and venturing to lay his hand upon her hair. "Don't fear. Your boy is safe."

"But, some one fell?"

"Yes, some one fell. Perhaps it was as good a way for him to end his life as any other. He was the kind of man who would be sure to die a violent death some time or other."

"Who was it?" she asked, under her breath.

"Lionel Bolton. He was there to try to assist us in getting possession of Aubrey for you."

"And I killed him?"

Alma shuddered and pressed her hands closer to her face.

"Don't worry about that, Alma. You did not kill him. How were you to know that there was any one outside the window?"

What she would have replied will never be known, for at that instant Hinckley burst into the room, pushing before him the Chinaman, Lo Shun!

"I notee know where they be," cried the Chinaman. "They killee me if I tellee, and now I here with allee wicked men who wantee killee poor Chinaman. Oh, it is velly bad!"

"What is it, Mug?" asked the detective, ignoring the wailing of the Chinaman.

"Why, they have just dashed up the street in a wagon."

"Who?" broke in Alma.

"Dan Duncan and Maza."

"And my boy? Of course my boy must

be with them. I know it. I am sure of it."

"Whether he is or not, we will make them stop," assured the detective, quietly. "As for this Chinaman, he has done all the mischief I mean to allow him to do. I'll put him in jail at once."

"Notee in jail," begged Lo Shun, falling on his knees. "Let me go! I takee you right to Dan Duncan and Maza, and the boy. I will. But lettee me go."

"He is lying, of course. He wouldn't take us to them, even if he knew where they were, which I doubt," declared Silver Sam, contemptuously. "No, I'll put him in jail; then I shall know where he is."

"Oh, but if he should be able to take us to my Aubrey! Surely we should not throw away a chance."

"No, notee throw away chance. Come! I show you. If I tellee you lie this time, then putee me in jail."

"Thar's sense in thet, Sam, don't yer think," observed Mug. "We kin easily fix ther Chink if he lies."

Wallace evidently considered that a good suggestion, for he was disposed to yield, when Bob Plympton entered and whispered in Silver Sam's ear.

"Go ahead, then, Lo Shun, and remember that, at the first sign of treachery, I will shoot you dead."

The detective showed his revolver to the Chinaman as he spoke, and Lo Shun responded, eagerly:

"Shootee me if I not allee lightee this time."

"We'll all come," decided Mug.

But the Chinaman vetoed this by saying:

"No, only Silver Sam! Allee others stay here."

"Don't do it, Sam. He wants ter give yer away," urged Mug, eagerly.

"I am not afraid. Do you mean to say that I can capture them by myself?" and the detective touched the bare neck of Lo Shun with the muzzle of his revolver.

The Chinaman shivered as he felt the cold metal on his flesh, but persisted in his declaration that he wanted only Sam with him.

"You see I am lightee!" he declared.

"Go ahead, then!" commanded the detective.

The Chinaman marched out, and the detective followed at his heels, leaving Alma Moore, with Hinckley and Bob Plympton, in the room which had so lately been tenanted by Maza, Dan Duncan and the boy.

Down in a dark room at the back of the saloon on the ground floor lay the dead body of Lionel Bolton, who had been instantly killed by his fall from the window ledge outside.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CONCLUSION.—SAFE AT LAST.

For ten minutes the two men and Alma Moore sat in silence. Then Mug said, sheepishly:

"Mrs. Moore, don't yer think I hev' done all I could fer you, and hev' yer hed any reason ter be sorry thet yer trusted me?"

Alma took the rough, hard hand of Hinckley between her own soft palms gratefully, and conveyed her gratitude in her eyes.

"Wow!" muttered Mug, under his breath. "Ain't she a daisy?"

The Briton looked at him in contempt. He knew that Mug had aspirations for the favor of Alma Moore, and felt about the same disgust that would have filled him at the proposition of a savage from the wilds of Africa to marry a beautiful American belle.

There was another pause, and Mug, with that want of tact which might be expected in such a man, made up his mind that this would be an opportune moment to propose to Mrs. Moore.

He sidled up to her, and there was an expression of admiration on his countenance that did not add to its beauty as he cast about for a proper form of words to address to her, when a noise was heard upon the stairs, and the next moment Mrs. Moore uttered a loud shriek and clasped her boy in her arms.

Aubrey had run straight to his mother,

and, strange to say, he appeared to be entirely alone.

"Door!" he gasped, as he sank into his mother's arms, as if he had found a haven of safety from which nothing could drag him.

Alma hardly understood what he meant, or, if she did understand, did not care, but Bob Plympton, who was more wide awake than any one else in the room, banged the door shut and shot the bolts.

But he was too late to prevent the entry of an unwelcome visitor.

Just as he pushed the door, a figure slipped through, and, even as he fastened the bolts, Maza, his face blazing with baffled rage, rushed at Alma and her boy.

His claw-like fingers were reaching toward the child's long hair, and had already seized the tresses, when Alma, with all the fierceness of a mother's love, shot out her fist, and struck the dwarf full in the forehead, hurling him to the floor.

Then Bob Plympton was upon him in an instant, and Hinckley assisted in holding the baffled dwarf down.

It was a fierce struggle, for the little monster seemed to have the strength of two ordinary men. But they accomplished it at last, and the dwarf lay, helplessly bundled up on the floor, with the barrel of a pistol between his teeth as a gag, while his arms and legs were wrapped with a rope found in the corner of the room.

"Wal, this is gittin' ther thing down to er fine point," observed Mug, looking complacently at the dwarf. "I guess thar ain't no doubt ez we hev' him all right, the human ape!"

"You z'ink so!" bawled the dwarf, as he managed to expel the pistol from his mouth. "You see!"

While lying on the floor, Maza had not been idle. His immense strength, coupled with his activity, had enabled him to loosen the ropes.

"Put that there pistol in 'is mouth ag'in," exclaimed Plympton. "We don't want to 'ear no talk out o' him."

Mug stooped over Maza, but only to be knocked backward, and the supposed prisoner was on his feet—on his feet to instantly spring at Alma!

With a savage wrench the human beast tore Aubrey out of her grasp, and, with a cry of triumph, he leaped to the window, the boy in his arms.

Bob Plympton drew his pistol, but Maza held the boy in front of him, and grinned defiance upon his enemies.

"Shoot him down! Shoot him down!" cried Alma.

"Shoot at me, and I drop z'e boy down—down to z'e street. Ha, ha! I have you now! Z'e boy is mine! I not give him to you now for less z'an five t'ousand dollars. And p'raps not for z'at. Maladetto! Maza hate z'e whole breed of z'e Moores. Me love you once, Alma!"

"Love!"

Alma Moore shuddered as if a snake had crawled over her face as she repeated the word.

"Yes. Me love you? Don't you z'ink I can love? But it is all over now, and I take my revenge for z'e many times you have said how hideous I was. I heard you when you z'ink I didn't. And now I have z'e boy all to myself. Dan Duncan never git him again. Good-by!"

"Oh! what can be done?" wailed Alma.

"Nozz'ing!" and the monster swung himself backward out of the window; then seized and clung tightly to the iron pipe. "Adios!"

Carefully holding the boy between himself and the room, the lithe and ape-like creature began to climb up to the roof by the iron pipe!

He could not hold the boy very well while climbing, but he told Aubrey to hold tightly to his neck, and the child obeyed in the instinct of self-preservation.

In another instant the dwarf stood on the roof, with the boy in his arms!

It was still quite dark—darker, in fact, than when Mug Hinckley, Bob Plympton and Silver Sam stood there together, and Maza hesitated for a moment as to which way he should go.

As he stood, with the little one in his

arms, he was suddenly caught around the neck by a strong arm, and the boy dropped to the roof, where he stood, dazed and frightened, not knowing what new danger had arisen.

Maza knew, however. He recognized the hard breathing of the man who had caught him around the throat, and knew that a struggle of life and death was to be decided on the roof.

"Duncan!" he whispered.

"Yes; Dan Duncan!"

There was no need for more to be said. Duncan it was, and there for vengeance, for he tightened his hold on the dwarf's throat.

"Give me a chance for my life!" hissed Maza; "don't play the coward! You are afraid of me!"

"Afraid?" repeated Duncan, contemptuously. "I'll give you the one chance you ask," and he released his hold of the dwarf's neck.

Almost before Duncan had time to think, Maza had drawn a knife and closed in on his foe.

There were three or four wild strokes of the knife, all of which Duncan managed to avert with the barrel of the pistol which he held in his hand.

"Maladetto! I kill you!" yelled the dwarf.

"Wal, kill away, you imp of a wolf!"

There was a return of the coolness characteristic of the gambler that made Maza now crazy with rage.

Stooping low, he tried to give Dan Duncan an upper cut, but failed, for the gambler was well versed in the tricks of knife fights, and deftly warded the blow, and throwing out his knee, Maza went spinning across the roof into collision with a chimney stack.

"Maladetto!" he spluttered. "I fix you now. Oh, if I had a pistol wiz' me! I shoot him dead before he could vink!"

Then he saw something that made him change his line of thought.

With a yell that resounded in the still night air like the shriek of a demon, he sprang forward.

Dan Duncan prepared to receive him, but swerving aside as he approached, the creature suddenly swooped down, and, seizing the boy in his arms, rushed around the chimney stack, and apparently jumped from the roof.

A thrill of horror ran through Duncan's bosom as he saw this horrible act, and he waited for the sickening crash that would come up from the street, far below.

He had hardly turned his steps toward the edge of the roof when he found himself in the grasp of hands of steel.

"It's no use, Duncan. You may as well give up. This is the end of your string."

It was the stern, steady voice of Silver Sam, and it was his steel-like fingers that seized the hand holding the pistol, and wrenched it from his hold.

It was all done so quickly that the gambler had no time to resist.

He had hardly recovered his breath, indeed, after his struggle with Maza, and almost ere he realized it a pair of handcuffs were slipped over his wrists, and he found himself a helpless prisoner.

"Well, Duncan, it has been a long chase, but it has ended at last," observed the detective. "You are a bold fellow, but you could not expect to go on forever. The laws of the land have some weight, you know, in spite of such men as you."

"But you didn't save the kid, did yer?" sneered Duncan. "And, even if I don't get Alma Moore and her money, neither do you."

"You are not quite right, even about that," answered Wallace, with a smile.

"What do yer mean?"

"I mean that the child was not killed, as you seem to infer."

"Why, I saw Maza and the boy go over ther edge of ther roof, right thar!"

"You think you did. But you didn't. There is the stack of chimneys there, you see, and just as Maza was going over, Mug Hinckley, who is a good fellow, and Bob Plympton, another good fellow, caught the little devil. There is Maza."

He pointed to a group behind the stack,

and Duncan saw that Maza was indeed a prisoner, with two policemen in full uniform holding him, while the steel handcuffs on his wrists settled it that he could not get away in a hurry again.

"So they hev' yer, Maza, eh?" cried Dan Duncan, with a sneer.

"Yes, z'ey z'ink z'ey have me. But I will get away, and you will meet me ag'in."

"You think so, eh, Maza?" put in Silver Sam. "Well, perhaps you will get away, but I don't think so."

"Whar's thet boy? I don't believe you hev' him?" growled Duncan.

At this moment Alma Moore appeared from behind a stack of chimneys.

There was no doubt now that she had her boy safely in her arms.

Dan Duncan and Maza did not get out again. There were charges of abduction and robbery against them, with suspicions of murder, enough to keep them in prison for the rest of their lives.

The Red Bluff gang was effectually broken up, now that the captain, Lionel Bolton, was dead, and Dan Duncan, its moving spirit, was in prison.

Mug Hinckley got over his infatuation for Mrs. Moore in due time, although he has never quite forgiven Silver Sam for leading him to believe that he had made an impression upon that lady.

Bob Plympton and his wife Betsy are still keeping their hotel at Tahoe, although they are pretty old people, now. Bob says he would like to see dear old Lannon once more before he dies, but the chances are that he will never go away, even for a month, from the home in which he has spent nearly all his life, in the glorious climate of California.

Silver Sam and Alma?

Married, of course. The reader who could not see that that must be the end of it has read with blinders on.

It was not for a year after the exciting events which ended in Alma obtaining possession of her boy again, but it came then, and there was no handsomer bride, and certainly no more manly bridegroom, in California than the detective whom the whole State admired as Silver Sam, the Shasta Sport.

THE END.

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